

4

STORY ■
SHIROW
SHIRATORI

ART ■
SHIRABII

SUPERVISION
■ SAIYUKI

THE RYUO'S WORK IS
NEVER DONE!



VISIT...

LANZAROTE
Caliente.COM

MIO MIZUKOSHI

J GRADE SCHOOLER PRACTICE GROUP S
FIELD TRIP TO HATOMORI SHRINE IN TOKYO

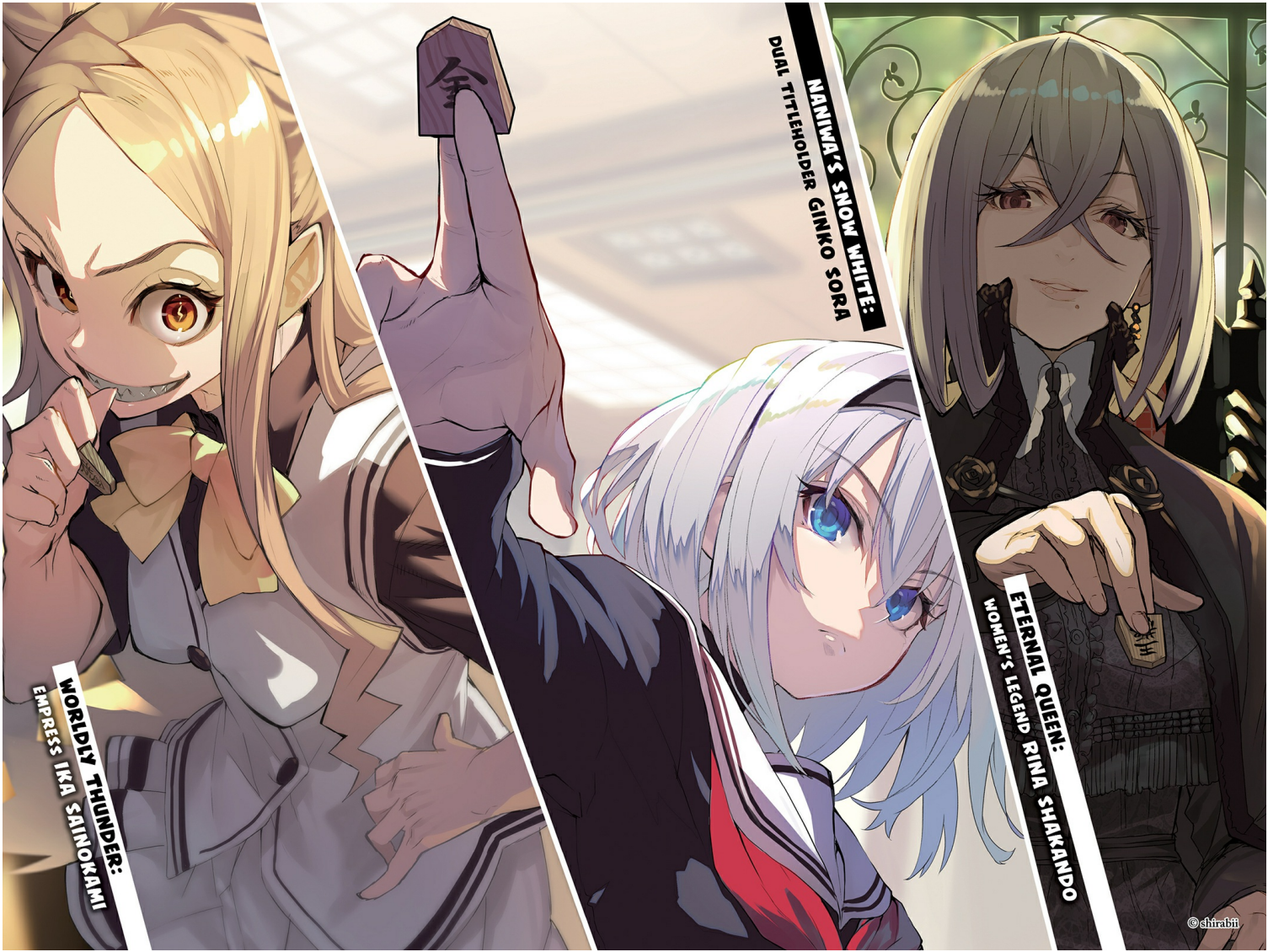
AI YASHAJIN

AI HINATSURU

AYANO
SADATOU

CHARLETTE
ISOIR

© shirabii



NANIWA'S SNOW WHITE:
DUAL TITLEHOLDER GINKO SORA

ETERNAL QUEEN:
WOMEN'S LEGEND RINA SHAKANDO

WORLDY THUNDER:
EMPRESS IKA SAINOKAMI



MEET THE CHARACTERS



YAICHI KUZURYU:
Ryuo. Once tried a new style, but it went so badly that he lost all interest in fashion.



AI HINATSURU:
Yaichi's first apprentice. Planning to charm ☆ her Master with a cute bathing suit this summer.



GINKO SORA:
Yaichi's elder sister apprentice. Has three identical school uniforms ready at all times: one for school, one for Shogi matches and a backup.



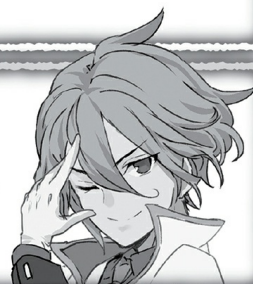
KEIKA KIYOTAKI:
Daughter of Yaichi's Master. Enjoys choosing outfits for others more than her own clothes.



AI YASHAJIN:
Yaichi's second apprentice. Upper class lady from Kobe. Prefers to shop online but enjoys walking around the food markets under department stores.



AKIRA IKEDA:
Ai Yashajin's bodyguard. Uncomfortable in "fancy and fashionable" stores, her wardrobe consists entirely of chain store suits.



AYUMU KANNABE:
Kanto professional Shogi player and Yaichi's rival. Spends most of his winnings on clothes and the remainder on dry cleaning.

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THE RYUO'S WORK IS NEVER DONE

VOLUME 4

SHIROW SHIRATORI

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Cover, opening artwork and all illustrations

Shirabii

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PROLOGUE

“Well, this is a first—you, calling me on the phone.”

A less than friendly voice came from the smartphone speaker and, for a moment, she felt a twinge of fear.

Indeed, it was the first time the girl had ever initiated a conversation.

Far from a phone call, the two had hardly ever spoken when they were in the same room together.

“So, what’s this about? I’ll hang up if it isn’t worth my time.”

“Ah, um Well ...”

Hesitating, the girl tries her best to string the words together.

“For Master’s———what to do for it”

“Goodbye.”

“W-Wait! Don’t hang up!!”

Worried the line would get cut off, she got to the point in a hurry.

“I want to———for a present!”

“.....!”

The person on the other end of the line gasped at her unexpected suggestion.

The fledgling conversation went quiet and ended in silence.

RECORD 1

Charlotte Izoard

CHARLETTE ISOIR

BWITHDAY: WINTA

BLWOOD TYPE: WHAT THAT?

HOME: FWANCE

TALENT: CHA, CHA'S GOTTEN GOOD AT
JWAPANESE SINCE COMING TO
JWAPAN!

FAVWORITE THINGS: ACORNS
MASTA!!



FIRST TOURNAMENT

“Whoa! Ai, Mount Fuji’s right out the window?!”

Mount Fuji comes into view in the middle of our trip to Tokyo on the bullet train and I try to get my apprentice to take a look.

“Come on, Ai. It’s really beautiful!”

“.....”

“Want me to get a picture for you?”

“Master.”

“Yeah?”

“I’m trying to focus. Please be quiet.”

“S-Sorry”

I just shrink back into my chair, the Master scolded by his own apprentice

My first apprentice has her shoes off, sitting on her heels in the window seat at the end of our three-seat row. But rather than looking outside, her nose is buried in a book of Shogi puzzles she has in her hands.

She’s already moved on from the three-step solutions, through the five-step ones and on to the sevens at a blistering pace. People who don’t know what she’s doing might think she’s just flipping through the pages.

And in the row in front of her, “My Lady! Please allow me to photograph you in front of Mount Fuji!! A picture to remember this trip by!!”

“..... Stop this, Akira. We’re on a train. It’s embarrassing”

My second apprentice, Ai Yashajin, and her bodyguard, Akira, are taking pictures.

It's the middle of July. Elementary schools are out for summer and today's the first day.

We left for Tokyo on the first bullet train early this morning.

As for why——.

"This is Ai's first tournament. There's nothing you can do if she wants to concentrate," Keika offers a kind word from her aisle seat as I wallow in despair.

We're all going to Tokyo to participate in a Shogi tournament.

But this isn't just any tournament. It's the largest competition in the Women's Shogi world and determines who's the best of the best. A once-a-year tournament that any girl, woman or grandma can enter.

—The Mynavi Women's Open.

"That being said, now might be a good time to talk about today."

"O-Oh, great idea! Alright everyone, meeting time!"

With a little support from Keika, I work up the courage to say, "Take a break from those puzzles!" to my first apprentice. Then, I address my second apprentice and Akira. "Stand up for a second so I can spin these seats around!" I press the lever and *spin. Click!*

Now that all six seats are facing each other, we can get started.

"Uh ahem. Being that this is your first Shogi tournament, it's my job as your Master to give you some important advice Hey, Ai! Put that book down! And Ai, take off your eye mask! I'm talking here, now's not the time to go to sleep?!"

"Listen, you two. You're good girls, so listen to what Yaichi has to say."

"Yeees."

"..... Fine. What is it?"

The two grade schoolers finally sit up straight to listen after Keika asks them.

But I'm the Master

"Uhh I'll get right to it. The most important thing to keep in mind during a tournament!"

I get back on track and impart the best advice a Master can give.

That's——.

"Don't break any rules!! That is all!!"

Ai Hinatsuru's eyes go wide as Ai Yashajin snorts through her nose like laughing off a bad joke.

"That's the most obvious thing I've ever heard. You don't have to tell me. Seriously, I'm not stupid."

"That's what everybody thinks is going in. But you'd be surprised how often it happens."

"Like Double Pawn?"

"Sometimes, but it's usually simple stuff like forgetting to press the chess clock after your turn and running out of waiting time. There are lots of rules to follow off the Shogi board. People get nervous and forget about the little things."

"....."

"....."

Both of them look skeptical.

It might be hard to believe since rule breaking in pro matches only happens once in a blue moon, but in a tournament like this where there's hardly any waiting time and you have to press the chess clock on your own, rule violations you'd never expect tend to pop up.

"You only have fifteen minutes of waiting time for this tournament and only thirty seconds per move once that's over. That's much, much less than the

Practice League. You'll be playing some new people too, so stay sharp."

"In the Practice League, there's thirty minutes of waiting time and then one-minute Shogi once it's gone so That's very short!"

"Shogi parlors play with ten-second Shogi, so I couldn't care less."

My first apprentice seems a bit nervous, but Ai Yashajin sounds almost bored.

She always marches to the beat of her own drum, so this is nothing new. But I've never seen Ai Hinatsuru this zoned in.

Sure, it's her first-ever Shogi tournament, but still

"Ai. I know this is your first one, but you can relax a bit. Plenty of Women's League players show up for the Mynavi Women's Open, but there are lots of amateurs playing too. That's where we're heading right now: the *challenge matches*. Most of the participants are amateurs."

"Challenge?"

"It's the preliminaries of the Preliminaries. Didn't you read the orientation manual?"

"O-Of course I did! But there were some really hard words in there that I couldn't read"

Ai Yashajin takes one heck of a dig at my first apprentice, and Ai Hinatsuru's defense is adorable.

The two of them are still in fourth grade. Ai Hinatsuru hasn't even been playing Shogi for a year yet.

"..... Ai is right. The challenge matches determine who participates in the preliminary match two weeks from today. The Finals are after that. The winner gets a chance to go against the Women's Queen titleholder—in other words, Naniwa's Snow White."

But of course, there's no way these two will get that far.

First off, they're a year younger than Big Sis was when she took the title.

Then there's the fact that the Women's League is much more competitive now than it was then and, as talented as these two girls are, there's no guarantee they'll make it through the challenge matches.

I only encouraged them to participate because I was thinking this would be fun for their summer break and it might be nice to get some experience at the same time. Some good memories, nothing more than that.

Pretty soon *I won't be able to spend much time with them at all.*

"Anyway, just don't break any rules, alright? Do your best and everything will work out."

My pep talk over, Keika speaks up from the chair next to me, "Yaichi. May I say a few words?"

"Ah, sure. Go right ahead"

Keika has been playing in these challenge matches for years, so her advice will be much more relevant than whatever I have to say. Thanks for the help!

"Women's League players and amateurs will be playing in today's challenge matches. Of course, the Women's League players are very good But it's the amateurs you should be afraid of. So don't let your guard down when you're playing against one of them."

"Whaa? Aren't all the *Senseis* in the Women's League there because they're good?"

"Tell me, Ai. What kind of people do you think are amateurs?"

"People not in the Women's League?"

"That's right. But that includes Practice League members like us and the classes above ours C-1- and B-ranking members are also playing."

"Whaaa?"

Ai sounds like she doesn't understand.

"But C-1 Can't they join the Women's League?! Why don't they?!"

"Should someone choose to leave the Practice League at that point, they'll join the Women's League with a 3-*kyu* rank. But that's just a temporary license."

"Temporary?"

"Yes. If they don't win enough matches within two years to promote to 2-*kyu*, they'll have to go back to the Practice League and try again."

"Huuuh!?"

As a member of the Practice League herself, Ai is shocked to hear the harsh truth.

"T-That's horrible Just when they got into the Women's League too"

"Rough, don't you think? That's why some people spend more time in the Practice League to build up their skills before registering or graduate first because they can't miss their classes while still in school Everyone has their reasons. It's a life-changing decision"

"Hah! Those are just excuses for weaklings." Ai Yashajin laughs. "Professional matches are at a much higher level than the Women's League, and plenty of those players do well enough to make their mark while still in high school or college. Being qualified but choosing not to register just proves they're not totally committed to Shogi. I won't believe those excuses for a moment!"

"..... Yes. You may be right," Keika quietly agrees. "To be completely honest, I don't think you're wrong. Even if I were in college, if I had a chance to become Women's League 3-*kyu* ... I'd join even if it meant dropping out. However ..."

"However?"

"If there were a way to *skip the whole thing and become an official Women's League member at 2-kyu from the start* Don't you think everyone would

try?”

“.....?!”

“.....?!”

“Get through today’s challenge matches and the preliminary match of the Mynavi Open, and you automatically qualify for Women’s League 2-*kyu*.”

Basically—you become a full-blown, no-license-necessary member of the Women’s League.

Winning enough matches in one Shogi tournament is enough to qualify.

That dream-come-true scenario doesn’t exist in the regular pros.

“But, that’s only true if you already have the 3-*kyu* qualification. Amateurs need to get that first They have to win a match in the Finals to do that.”

“So then, you’re saying that, umm ... amateurs can join the Women’s League without going through the Practice League if they win the challenge matches, preliminaries and one match in the Finals?”

“Yes! Great summary, Ai.”

“E-hehe♪,” my first apprentice grins with glee as Keika pats her on the head.

Kh! What wouldn’t I give for Keika to pat me?!

“So you see, the Mynavi Open? It’s the shortest route to the Women’s League. That’s why everyone fights like their lives depend on it Just like me.”

“.....!”

“.....!”

Her voice was soft but it had so much power behind it that Ai Hinatsuru and even Ai Yashajin gulp.

Keika is in a really bad spot in the Practice League right now.

I'm sure plenty of other women in the Kanto, Tokai and Kyushu Practice Leagues are too.

But it's not just them. The people who already have a C-1 ranking only need to clear the preliminary match and they can join the Women's League at 2-*kyu* right away. Talk about a good position.

The women who already have a secure spot in the Women's League and the amateurs who don't—as to which one is going to be more desperate to win: it's obvious.

“Well, that's all from me! I know I said a lot, but all you should worry about is winning the match you're playing. Let's do our best!”

“I will!!”

“Humph

My first apprentice looks ready to take on the world while my second quietly flicks her hair over her shoulder.

Opposite reactions But their eyes have a spark that wasn't there before Keika's talk.

Meanwhile I realize just how unneeded I am.

Relax, most of them are amateurs! What was I thinking, making an offhand comment like that to my apprentices who are trying to join the Women's League themselves? I don't know jack squat about the Women's Shogi world, shamefully so

I lean over and quietly thank Keika so that only she could hear.

“..... You always know just what to say, Keika. Thanks.”

“Hehe Seeing me in a more positive light?”

More positive light? Keika, I'm falling in love with you all over again.

“But I have to say, Keika With everything that's on the line, you're really

calm.”

“Did you think I’d be frozen with fear?”

This tournament is one of Keika’s last chances to become a Women’s League player.

Anyone would be nervous in her shoes, that’s normal

“I lost to Ai in the Practice League a little while ago, remember? It took a lot of weight off my shoulders. I only have a few chances left, so I might as well enjoy them.”

“..... You’ve changed quite a bit, Keika.”

She looks at me with a cheerful smile right before playing in a tournament that could decide the rest of her life.

Just as that beautiful, refined smile sent butterflies loose in my stomach——.

“Hey, hey Ai! Let’s see who can solve Shogi puzzles faster!” my first apprentice says to the girl sitting across from her as she takes a book of long sequence Shogi puzzles out of her backpack, which is next to me.

“Huh? Why would I ever——.”

“I can’t focus when I try it by myself. Race me! Please?!”

“..... Fine.”

I thought she’d refuse, but Ai Yashajin gives in. That doesn’t happen every day.

Well, it’s her first tournament too. She might be a little worried. My two apprentices sit knee to knee and start solving extremely hard Shogi puzzles one after another.

Keika watches them work, a blinding smile on her face.

“..... The Shogi world is going to be turned on its head once these two take center stage. They might even get on the national news like Ginko——.”

“Really? There are so many girls who’ve passed through the *kyu* rankings into *dan* out there by now. Do you really think anyone will notice?”

“You’re grinning, Yaichi.”

“I am?!”

“Just☆ kidding.”

Keika pokes my cheek and grins, teasing me.

IKA SAINOKAMI

The tournament is being held a short distance from the Tokyo station at the Palace Side Building.

Keika leads all of us through Ohtemachi to the Tozai subway line and out to Takebashi Station.

The building itself is connected to the station by an underground tunnel, so we don't have to go back outside to get to the arena.

The building is literally standing to the *side* of the Imperial Palace in Tokyo. The structure is a fancy modern office building, but the underground tunnel has to be decades old. It's practically a dungeon down here.

I happen to spot a convenience store built into the underground along the way and stop walking.

"I'm going to make a quick pit stop. And I'll pick up some food and drinks at the convenience store, so you guys go on ahead and register."

"You're a lifesaver, Yaichi! See you there!"

Keika leads the group toward the upper floors.

Even taking the earliest bullet train out of Osaka, we're cutting it pretty close. Every player that lives outside the city is destined to go through this every time, but when it comes to settling down to play your best Shogi, we're running behind. I've got to lend a hand any way I can.

"Now then"

I took a moment to wash up once I was finished in the men's room.

A titleholder stopping by an event like this means getting swamped by reporters and live bloggers. They'll be taking pictures, so I need to look my best.

A little bit of wax to keep my hair in place, necktie straight and tight and no random nose hairs.

“..... Yes! I clean up pretty good.”

Today’s the day my apprentices make their tournament debut. That only happens once in a lifetime.

I want to look like a Master who Ai and Ai can be proud to stand next to. This must be how a father feels watching his daughters in class at school.

And Hehe! Just like Keika said: those two might get a lot of attention. I can see the headline now: *A Family of Shogi Prodigies Has Arrived!* Maybe it’ll show up in *Shogi World* magazine?

My hair looking far better than I expected, I step out into the convenience store with a little extra zip and pick up a few drinks and sandwiches just in case.

There are plenty of restaurants and cafés all over the place, so it’d be easy enough to eat lunch at one of them. However, there’s a chance that matches will run long and lunch breaks will be cut short.

Shopping done, I head up the stairs and back aboveground.

That’s when the trouble started.

“..... Where’s the arena again?”

I’m so lost.

It’s early in the morning on Sunday, so there aren’t any office workers to be seen.

All of the lights are off too. I bet this place is deserted outside of the arena.

But at the same time, I’d rather not call Keika to ask for directions right now. It’d break her concentration.

I take a few long moments to think over my options when—.

“Theeere you are ≡”

Hearing that voice was like getting struck by lightning But my skin is freezing over.

A single girl is standing in the middle of the dim lobby.

Almost as if she'd been waiting for me right here for over 1,000 years

“Yaichi,” says the girl in a clammy, almost vicious voice. “Have you thought about *that*? It's about time I got an answer.”

“Y-You What are *you* doing here?! You don't play until the Preliminaries?!”

“Come on, tell meee.”

“What the hell are you doing here?! Answer me!!”

“.....”

Silence. Then—.

“A feeling?”

..... A feeling, say what?

“A feeling that you might come through here. It's destiny, and I felt it.”

“Destiny? I think your radar is broken”

“Tsk!” She snaps her tongue at my answer. “But that doesn't matter, just tell me now. Right now. Nownownownownow—.”

Frustrated, she chews on her thumbnail and ups the ante.

That's not normal. Not at all. Way too unstable.



Worldly Thunder—Ika Sainokami.

Possessing one of the six Women's League titles, *Empress*, she's a seventeen-year-old girl from Iwate Prefecture. Fans and older Shogi players like to call her Sparky, but that cute nickname doesn't suit her at all.

A monster—she's some kind of evil specter.

"..... How many times do I have to tell you? *That* answer is no."

I spit out my words through gritted teeth.

"More importantly, you've got the preliminary match to worry about. Focus on that."

"Winning this whole thing will only get me a match with Ginko, right? Sooo boring. Boringboringboringboringboringboringboring—I."

"Say that after you beat Big Sis, why don't you?!"

"No good."

Cackling with laughter, the beast tells me why.

"I can't play seriously when all my opponents are so weak."

Normally, that's what someone trying to act tough would say.

It's an insult to the entire Women's League, calling the undefeated Naniwa's Snow White *weak* like that.

But when it comes to Ika Sainokami, that's not an act.

Ika is the type of player who plays better the stronger her opponent is. Her match records prove it.

Her win-loss record against pros is better than anyone else by a long shot.

Big Sis is still in the Sub League, so she doesn't enter into it, but when a Women's League player claims a title, they also get the chance to play against pro players.

Ika's match was televised, and she went off like a bomb. She went on to utterly destroy every pro she's gone up against with a live audience. Sunday morning Shogi TV shows have turned into a bloodbath because of her.

There's nothing more humiliating than for a pro player to lose to a Women's League player or an amateur. Once their title of *professional* gets called into question, there's nothing left.

And Ika does it to them without feeling a thing.

In an interview that she did after dismantling a veteran player on live TV using less than a minute of waiting time in only forty-six turns, she said: "*What kind of strategy did you prepare for today's match?*"

"Meh, winged it."

Shogi fans had a field day. Her popularity skyrocketed.

People on the Internet message boards described her Shogi style as: "Picking up a Rook and coming up with a strategy in the next tenth of a second"; "Making a move at random to decide the day's strategy with eyes closed"; "Ranging Rook fortune-telling."

That's what they thought of it. They're pretty much spot on.

Ginko Sora has a better record.

But, in terms of talent, Ika is far ahead of her.

Many fans think so, and quite a few pro players share that opinion.

Ika and Big Sis have only played one match, several years ago And Big Sis took the win back then.

However, *people came away with the impression that, despite the loss, Ika had more talent.*

A prodigy and off her rocker, Ika could very well be the most talented female Shogi player on the planet. More talented than Big Sis, more talented than

either of the Ai's. I know that more than anyone.

More than anyone else Me

"..... Anyway, my answer is no. Now and forever."

"Well, would you give the okay if I beat Ginko? That way I could actually play like I mean it."

"You have to get through my apprentices first."

"Apprentices?"

"Both are still in grade school, but they're good. More talented than you," I say, trying my best to sound tough.

"Uw-heh!"

Smirk A beastly smile grows on her lips as Ika Sainokami crackles with laughter from deep in her gut. "E-he-he-he-he-he-he-he." She's not stopping.

On and on. With no end in sight.

FIRST CAMPAIGN

Once I left Ika behind, walking just slow enough that it wouldn't look like I was running away, I arrived at the arena in the middle of the opening ceremony.

Mynavi company board members were in the middle of giving speeches and shaking hands with the participants, so I tried to sneak in as quietly as I could—.

“Look?! Isn't that the Ryuo?!”

“What's the Ryuo doing in Tokyo?!”

“Hey! A flower! Someone get a flower for the Ryuo—.”

The whole arena erupts at the unexpected arrival of one of the Shogi world's top figures.

“My apprentices are here, so

Explaining why I came only added fuel to fire.

“Did he say what I think he said?! The Ryuo's apprentices?!”

“Wait, I think I read that somewhere

“The Ryuo's apprentices are here, now?!”

“Are they good?”

“Which ones?”

They're begging me to introduce them in front of everyone, but I politely decline.

Unfortunately, the only way they'd leave me alone was by agreeing to do commentary for the Internet broadcast later on.

“..... Haaa, guess I've got no choice then. I wasn't planning on working today,

you know?”

I spot Ai Yashajin and start leading the group in her direction. However, all their staring didn’t bother the grade schooler at all, quite the opposite. She starts berating her Master, the Ryuo, in front of everyone.

“You’re late. Where were you? Twiddling your thumbs?”

“My bad. Got a bit lost.”

“My word, you *are* useless trash, *kuzu*.”

I keep the situation with Ika to myself. Bringing up that weird incident right before her first match would only be a distraction and I don’t want that. No matter what she says, I just have to take it

Where is everyone else? I glance around the arena and——.

I spot Ai Hinatsuru, sitting in a chair and concentrating with her eyes closed.

“!? Ai

She’s so focused——so in the zone that I’m not sure if it’s okay to get her attention or not.

It’s almost like she’s got this burning blue aura around her whole body I can tell she’s not here for the *fun summer memories*. She’s here to win, to win it all. Maybe it’s because she found out she can become a member of the Women’s League? She looks so much more motivated than during Practice League matches.

“..... Where’s Keika?”

Ai Yashajin jerks her chin toward the corner of the arena. There——.

“..... ♣ 7 Six Pawn ♠ 8 Four Pawn ♣ 6 Eight Silver ♠ 3 Four Pawn ♣ 7 Seven Silver ♠ 6 Two Silver ♣ 2 Six Pawn ♠ 4 Two Silver

Keika is standing with her back to the arena, whispering to the wall like reciting a Buddhist chant as she traces out a standard *yagura* on it.

“..... There was a character like that in *Hikaru no Go*.”

“Stop making stupid jokes and do something about it.”

My second apprentice pushes me with her foot. Well, yeah, but what?

“K- Keika? Reviewing standards is great, but the first match is about to start——.”

“ 4 Eight Silver  8 Five Pawn  7 Eight Gold  3 Two Gold  5 Six Pawn
 5 Four Pawn”

“M-Meeting! Everyone, over here!!”

I give Keika a bottle of hot tea and rub her back while calling everyone into the corner.

“Listen up, okay? Calm down and listen to me The challenge matches are sudden death, but you’ve still got the *Second Chance Block* even if you lose a match. So, don’t let the pressure get to you and lose concentration even if you don’t win.”

“Second Chance?”

Ai Hinatsuru tilts her head. So cute.

“So How many times should I win?”

“Four in a row. Don’t think about anything else.”

For both of my apprentices, this is their first tournament. Asking them to win four matches in a row against Women’s League players and strong amateurs might be a little much.

But I want them to experience as many things as possible. How to deal with pressure is on the list.

“The first round is set up so that the Women’s League players won’t go against each other. On the flip side, that means the amateurs will have to play against them first. I realize that means you’ll be challenged right out of the gate,

but rather than backing down I'd like you to think of it as a way to test your skills——."

"Haaah? Why would I back down?"

Ai Yashajin doesn't seem to understand the concept.

"The Women's League players who didn't get seeded are one thing, but they're old ladies who get treated like amateurs in their own league, right? In that case, I'd much rather go against them than the younger, driven amateurs."

"..... You really don't need much attention as an apprentice"

Her sheer mental fortitude is a talent on its own.

Ai Hinatsuru is looking at her with sparkles in her eyes, saying, "You're amazing, Ai!"

Meanwhile, Keika is staring at her in disbelief and muttering, "Is this girl really in elementary school"? It's like she's looking at an alien.

Fifteen minutes later.

Participants drew numbers to determine their blocks and all three of them went to the boards.

Ai Hinatsuru walks up there with a mixture of fighting spirit and determination. Ai Yashajin looks like the star of the show.

And then there's Keika, teetering back and forth like a prisoner on her way to the guillotine

"M-May I watch inside as well"?

"Of course. Please make yourself at home."

I lead Akira, wearing her visitor's pass like a necklace, to the chairs set up for the observers.

"Challenge matches aren't open to the public, but as you can see, lots of kids participate. Parents and guardians can watch the matches."

The participants are divided into five blocks.

Looking at the board with everyone's names, I'm relieved to see that Ai Yashajin is in Block 2, Ai Hinatsuru is in Block 4 and Keika is in Block 5. No one will have to play each other. Talk about luck!

On the other hand, their matchups aren't lucky at all. All three of them are facing Women's League players.

"Ai is facing Ms. Shakushi."

"Your Ai is? And, who is that?"

"Tomoe Shakushi Women's 2-*dan*. From Kouchi Prefecture, I think? And, about thirty years old Maybe? Sounds about right"

"Your data is far too vague"

Can you blame me? She's not in my generation And I don't have much of a chance to go against Women's League members, so it's just a quick *hello* every now and then when I see one at the association

"It is now 10:00 a.m. Please begin."

"When you're ready!"

As soon as that announcement echoes through the arena, sixty of the seventy women who had gathered together for the tournament, the ones who didn't get seeded, all bow at the same time.

Thirty chess clocks click to life as one. A wave of snaps fills the air as first moves are made.

Nostalgia hits me out of nowhere, memories of my days as an amateur in elementary school flash before my eyes—.

"..... Nh!!"

Ai Hinatsuru sticks the Pawn out in front of her Rook at the very moment she finished her bow.

Ms. Shakushi leaves her Bishop Path closed and slides her Rook to the center of the board. That's Primitive Central Rook. It's turning into Static Rook vs. Ranging Rook, a power struggle. Ai is good at those.

"So far so good. As long as Ai can stay on pace"

"Oi! Enough about her. What is transpiring in My Lady's match?!"

"Ggh! I can't breathe! Akira, stop pulling my tie!!"

And I had it set up so nice too!

Akira forcefully pulls me over to look at Ai Yashajin's board and tells me about her opponent.

"Midori Ubaguchi Women's 3-*dan*. Thirty-four years old. Reportedly from Yamanashi Prefecture. Playing primarily Static Rook, she specializes in *yagura*, Bishop Exchange and Side Pawn to capture is what's written in this book."

The Mynavi Women's Open is sponsored by a company called *Mynavi*. They've published a ton of books about Shogi as well.

All participants receive a book of their choice as a gift and there's a small bookshop set up just outside the entrance, cash register and all. Akira must've bought one to look up some personal data on the Women's League players.

"While she hasn't had much success in the Mynavi Women's Open, she appears to be doing quite well in the main Women's League matches."

"Oh? That's pretty rare."

"What is?"

"Most female players that age play Ranging Rook. There's a lot to remember when using Static Rook, and especially for Bishop Exchange, you have to stay up-to-date on the latest strategies. Otherwise, you can't keep up——."

Ai, on offense, uses her first move to open the Bishop's Path while I was speaking.

Ubaguchi Women's 3-*dan* thinks for a moment and opens her Bishop's Path as well.

Seeing that, a surprised Ai Yashajin says, "My, my. Are you sure?"

".....?"

"Is it okay for a Women's League member to open the Bishop's Path like that?"

"!!"

Ms. Ubaguchi's calm demeanor disappears in the blink of an eye. Ai's taunt hit home.

Her expression didn't change that much, but her ears turned bright red. I can almost see the anger in her eyes.

That reaction tells me two things.

First, that Ms. Ubaguchi thought Ai Yashajin was a pushover.

And the second is Ms. Ubaguchi *isn't all that good*.

The thing about Bishop Exchange is that you can never leave yourself open. Getting angry enough to forget the situation puts you at a serious disadvantage right off the bat.

The board doesn't show it, but Ai has already taken a considerable lead.

"..... Atta girl."

"How do you mean?"

"She lost in the Practice League when Keika did this very thing to her. Ai has accepted that it happened and is now using that technique. She's a born competitor."

"Ha-ha-ha! That she is. Well, I was never worried about her in the first place!"

"....."

I'm not so sure about that.

Ms. Ubaguchi fell for Ai's taunt and dove headfirst into a Bishop Exchange match, a Move-Loss Bishop Exchange match to be exact.

She probably wants to show this bratty grade schooler how scary pros can be. There's a faint grin on her lips, kind of like she can't wait to see the look on Ai's face.

What she didn't know is that she was sticking her hand right into the wolf's mouth

Keika's opponent is Kazumi Houroku Women's 3-*dan*.

"People call her *Ms. Ka-boom* or *Gunma's Dynamite*. Basically, she's known for her ballistically aggressive playing style. Her attacks go off like bombs, sometimes blowing her opponent out of the water, but other times destroying her own defenses and she'll lose everything at once"

"Does that mean she's a strong player? Or does it mean she's weak?"

"Oh, she's strong. She's even taken down an A League 8-*dan* player before."

And this type of match favors her playing style. She's right at home.

"Ka-boom!!"

Ms. Houroku says her trademark phrase and starts a massive advance.

It looks extremely forced Well, a full-on explosion——.

"Khh!"

Keika grimaces as she focuses on building a defense.

"..... Practice Shogi matches are one thing, but everyone tenses up and tries to play it safe in league matches or on a big stage like the Mynavi Women's Open ... except Ms. Houroku, who looks like her usual self."

“She’s self-destructing? Then, Keika will emerge victorious?”

“With the way Keika is right now, I doubt it

Forced offensives don’t do very well in Shogi matches with plenty of waiting time, but they tend to overwhelm opponents when time is limited. Reason being, the defender has more chances to make mistakes.

And these challenge matches—hardly have any waiting time at all.

Looking back at Ai Hinatsuru’s match, pieces clashing all over the board have turned it into a smoldering battlefield.

“Well now It sure seems like the Women’s League player called Shakushi has the upper hand. She’s made a series of split-second decisions these past few turns and is maintaining a great deal of waiting time.”

“..... Weak.”

“What?”

Akira looks confused, so I explain.

“The reason that Ms. Shakushi is playing so fast is because she’s going with her gut feeling rather than reading the board. She should be using her waiting time right now. Ai understands that, but Ms. Shakushi doesn’t. That’s why she’s weak.”

“.....”

“To be blunt, there are usually three *good* moves you can make each turn. Keep shooting in the dark and you’re bound to hit one of them more often than not. But that won’t last forever.”

Then, Ms. Shakushi messes up.

Ai’s *aura* changed that instant, like she flipped a switch.

“..... Here Here Here

“.....?”

Ms. Shakushi doesn't know how to react to the little girl jerking forward and backward and softly mumbling to herself across from her.

But Ai didn't even notice. She's delving deeper and deeper into the board.

“Here, here, here, here,
herehereherehereherehereherehereherehere—.”

Ai's soft, fine hair starts to billow out. Her skin tends to heat up when her brain gets going and that makes her hair sway back and forth. It dries real quick if Ai plays Shogi right after a bath.

Then—.

“——Here!!”

“?”

She reaches out in a long arc like a cat reaching for a fish and *snap!!* Ai makes her move with a high-pitched crack.

It was one-sided Shogi from there.

Ai makes her moves right away. On the other hand, Ms. Shakushi starts using her waiting time in bits and pieces Each move taking longer than the last.

Akira asks me in a concerned voice.

“S-Should she be playing at that pace?! I hardly believe she’s accurately reading the situation——.”

“This is fine.”

“What?”

"Because she's already read to the end."

At almost the same time I said that ...

“..... Agh?!”

Ms. Shakushi realizes her King is trapped.

She used her next few turns to set the scene—then Tomoe Shakushi Women's 2-*dan* threw in the towel.

"..... I lost."

"Uwheh?"

Ai looks up, her face like she just woke up from a dream.

"Oh! Thank you very much!!"

She throws her head down in a panicked bow.

All the excitement and happiness from winning her first-ever tournament match have turned her cheeks red, like two apples on her face.

Her Master might just cry

"..... That was quite the advance. I never thought you would actually do it and got so surprised that I tried to escape in the wrong direction."

After the last move.

Hiding the pain that comes from losing to an amateur still in grade school with a smile, Ms. Shakushi insinuates that she only lost because of her own mistake.

"Women's League members don't play that recklessly I hate to admit it, but I played a lot like you when I was an amateur, forcing things (haha)."

"U-Um Yes. I knew it was a little risky but, " Ai starts saying, cautiously at first before speaking out loud and clear.

"I saw the checkmate."

".....?!"

Ms. Shakushi's eyes fly open. She responds, sounding a bit peeved.

“B-But! If I’d done this, wouldn’t it be too soon to know for sure?”

“Moving here would stop it.”

“.....?! Th-Then, should I have tried to escape this way?”

“? That’s a checkmate too.”

“Agh!”

Ai looks so confused wondering why her opponent *would ask something so obvious* as she demonstrates a long sequence by quickly moving pieces around the board as if she were playing connect-the-dots.

She didn’t *read* all of those checkmates so much as she *saw* them.

It’s to the point that she can’t believe other people can’t see it too.

“.....”

I could see Ms. Shakushi’s fighting spirit drain from her body.

The longer their review session went, the more possible sequences she brought up, the more she realized that Ai’s reading skills were far beyond her own

The pain of this *second loss* during the review session, and losing to an amateur grade schooler participating in her first tournament, was so great that Shakushi Women’s 2-*dan* left the challenge matches without a single victory.

Meanwhile, Ai Yashajin and her opponent were still in the early game and in the middle of building their formations.

It’s the early game—but the match has already been decided.

“Ah aghhh”

For Ubaguchi Women’s 3-*dan*, falling for Ai’s taunt and moving forward with Move-Loss Bishop Exchange have already put this much out of reach.

“B-But, how? Where did?”

Turning pale, Ms. Ubaguchi starts thinking back through each move to figure out if she’d made a mistake. Anyone doing that during a match knows they already lost.

Ms. Ubaguchi, every second of her waiting time used up, feels the pressure and makes a less than perfect move.

Ai moves to take advantage of it in no time.

Her form and placement were graceful But there was a hint of aggravation in that *snap* when the piece hit the board.

You’re still trying? You know this is over, right? How can you not understand that?

She’s grilling her opponent with those snaps.

SNAP! Ms. Ubaguchi shivers as she reaches for the board but stops halfway before pulling her hand back and setting it down on her knee. Her fists are clenched, shaking.

Then, with all the effort she could muster, she says, “..... I’m out of options”

“Thank you.”

There was no review session.

“I see I knew both of you were good”

The first round is over.

Keika was the only one of the three to lose. She’s slumped over a chair, staring at the ceiling Probably so we can’t see her cry

Ms. Houroku’s explosion hit dead center and blew Keika to smithereens. She did her best to hold out but had to surrender in a miserable state.

And now Keika is broken.

“I’m so sorry. Sorry that I was the only one to lose. Sorry to rain on everyone’s parade

“K-Keika

“

Unsure what to say, Ai Hinatsuru is teetering back and forth while even Ai Yashajin’s usually sharp tongue is staying put.

Well, I can’t blame them. What are you supposed to say at times like this

Keika came all the way from Osaka for a chance to finally realize her dream of joining the Women’s League only to have that dream crushed after just one match. Of course this would happen to her The fact that these two grade schoolers beat Women’s League players sure doesn’t help.

But it was the arena announcer who really poured salt on the wound.

“First round winners, please start making preparations for the second round matches! Would those who unfortunately lost in the first round please wait while the Second Chance Block is being organized! Losers, please wait!”

I’m begging you, announcer, don’t say *losers*!!

“A- All right, you two. Your matches are about to start Let me handle this and get going.”

“O-Okay

“Humph

Ai Hinatsuru backs away with an apologetic look on her face while the awkwardness seems to be getting to Ai Yashajin. Both make their way to the arena for the second round.

Keika groans as she limply slides down the chair.

“Old soldiers never die They simply fade away

“You’re not disappearing any time soon! Don’t forget about the Second Chance Block!”

“T-That’s right, Keika! The match is already over if you’ve given up!!”

Akira and I desperately try to motivate Keika and somehow convince her to head to the next match. “I shall go die a beautiful death,” she says, not saying anything remotely positive on her way out.

The first campaign over, the victorious Ai’s are headed to their Second Block matches while the defeated Keika makes her way through the *back alleys* of the arena to participate in the Second Chance Block.

No matter how hard people tried to cheer her up, everyone thought that Keika’s chances of advancing past the challenge matches were bleak at best. That’s just how she was She was mentally weak and flimsy

But who would’ve ever thought?

That one loss—was going to change Keika’s life forever.

SHOGI JOURNALIST AT WORK

“All right, Ryuo. If you would please add your commentary.”

Time flew by—it’s already the afternoon, the fourth round is about to begin.

I was summoned to the journalists’ room, separate from the arena, to help analyze my apprentices’ matches.

“As I’m sure you are aware, real-time updates involving popular players are posted on the Internet during the challenge matches. The main two we’ll be covering during the fourth round are Miss Ai Hinatsuru’s and Miss Ai Yashajin’s matches. You will be able to see both of their boards on that tablet, Ryuo. Your input on your apprentices’ playing styles and their individual matches would be greatly appreciated.”

“I see

“Other journalists sitting board-side will relay information through their tablets and the two of us will work together to provide a narrative. Do you have any questions?”

“Well I understand that but——.”

This Shogi journalist who goes by the pen name *Mato* has covered many of my matches.

The most recent one she did was my match against Mr. Natagiri in the Ken-ou League (that I won with three consecutive *gentei aigoma*!) but she also covered my match in the Emperor League against Ayumu (that I won after hundreds of moves!).

Shogi journalists mainly write articles for newspapers and Shogi magazines, but they also do real-time updates and blogs for matches like this: what Ms. Mato is doing now.

Which is fine but——.

“Um, Ms. Mato?”

“What is it?”

“Why Why are you in Tokyo? You live in Osaka, right? You didn’t come all the way out here just for a few challenge matches, did you?”

“I enjoy my work,” she says without missing a beat and adjusts her glasses before laying a white cloth over her computer’s keyboard to keep it from making any noise.

With live coverage from the 11th Mynavi Women’s Open Challenge Matches, final round of Block 4, this is Chihiro Hannuki Women’s League 3-*dan* vs. Ai Hinatsuru (amateur). The victor will proceed to the preliminary match while the other will transfer to the Second Chance Block.

The match will begin at 1:30 p.m. Players will have fifteen minutes of waiting time tracked by their own chess clock, changing to Thirty-Second Shogi once time has expired.

Providing commentary for this match is Yaichi Kuzuryu-ryuo, who also happens to be Ai Hinatsuru’s Master.

Piece flip resulted in 4 Pawns. Hannuki has the first move. (Entered by = Mato)

“Ms. Mato How do you type that fast?”

“I have several phrases set up to hotkeys. For example——.”

“S” → Short pause, ♜ 9 Eight Lance. Setting up for an *anaguma*.

“G” → Golds and Silvers in place, a beautiful *anaguma* is complete.

“W” → Was too far off, an *anaguma* won the match.

She certainly has a thing for the *anaguma* defense

“..... Okay. And what kinds of things should I talk about?”

“Since we have two matches going at once, keep an eye on the tablet and please point out important moves. Otherwise, keep talking with me and I will add your comments as they come up.”

“A long chat with you, is it?”

“Fun, don’t you think?”

Defending player Hinatsuru (A) is a fourth-grade elementary school student.

A member of the Kansai Practice League, this is her Women’s Tournament debut. With three consecutive victories, she has reached the final round of this Block.

Her victories came against Tomoe Shakushi Women’s 2-*dan*, Yume Izari Women’s 1-*dan* and Yae Yuinou Women’s 2-*dan*. Each a talented player, Hinatsuru (A) didn’t make it this far on luck alone.

Here to comment on the Ryuo’s apprentice’s match is the Ryuo himself.

“Let’s focus on the fast-paced Miss Hinatsuru’s Shogi first.”

“It looked like Side Pawn Capture but Ms. Hannuki didn’t take the Pawn. With it still in place on the board, the match is turning into an *aigakari* Double Wing Attack. Rather than relying on research against an unfamiliar opponent, she opted for a contest of strength with the Double Wing which, unfortunately for her, is Ai’s favorite strategy. On defense, I’m sure this is exactly what she wanted.”

“So, does Miss Hinatsuru excel at the Double Wing Attack?”

“She sure does. Ms. Mato, you’ve never seen Ai play before, have you?”

“I have not. Although my younger sister often plays against her in the Practice League.”

“Ai started playing Shogi after seeing me use it in the Ryuo Title Match. It was the only way she knew how to play when she started. I’ve taught her a lot more since then, but it seems that the Double Wing is her favorite. She’s so sensitive

to the small details.”

“I see, I see. She’s a Master’s pride and joy.”

The match has changed from Side Pawn Capture to Double Wing. Hannuki’s movements are quick and precise, all according to plan?

Not to be outdone, Miss Hinatsuru is keeping pace. Is she in over her head?

A comment from Kuzuryu-ryuo “I’ve developed Ai so much. So sensitive.”

“..... Wait a sec, Ms. Mato.”

“Something wrong?”

“The way you phrased it makes me sound like a pervert. I didn’t say anything like that.”

“There’s only so much room for comments. I have no choice but to abbreviate to save space.”

“Please fix it.”

“This is real time, so that’s impossible. Please continue with your commentary.”

“..... Ms. Hannuki starts the battle by pushing her third file Pawn forward and slides her Rook to the middle of the board. She’s changed to a Twisting Rook style. However, I think this is a mistake.”

“Is that so? It seems like a perfectly natural move to me

“It would have been better to do a Bishop Exchange rather than move the Rook

Ahh, see there? Ai did the Bishop Exchange. It may look like doing that on defense is a wasted turn, but Ms. Hannuki doesn’t have any open attack options. Ai is in better shape.”

Hannuki readies to attack using Twisting Rook, but the defending Miss Hinatsuru ignores it and executes a Bishop Exchange. Despite gaining the extra turn, Hannuki has no viable attack options. She holds her head in her

hands, thinking.

Kuzuryu-ryuo, “Grade schoolers have better shape.”

“Hey!”

“What is it now?”

“What’s with that tone?! I’m not the one bothering you, you’re the one causing problems for me!! Are you *trying* to give people the wrong idea, writing things like that?!”

“Haaa All right then, what kind of phrasing would satisfy you?”

“Nice and normal, the truth——.”

“Understood. Then I will type a nice and normal profile for Miss Hinatsuru. Let me think, she started living with you as an apprentice in the spring——.”

“Hold it!”

“Yes?”

“Hold up, that Could you not say that she’s a live-in apprentice?”

“Why not? Are you trying to hide that fact?”

“I’m not trying to hide it, exactly.”

“Then perhaps are you feeling guilty about something?”

“No, there’s nothing like that.”

“Then what’s the problem with me writing it? Writing that you live with an elementary school girl? In a two-bedroom apartment? That she makes you lunch every day?”

“I’d ... prefer you didn’t”

“And there’s nothing inappropriate going on, correct?”

“No, not at all. Not a single thing. Why would there be?”

Yes. I’ve got nothing to hide.

Nothing But no matter how much I try to explain that, people in Kansai think that I have some kind of Lolita complex just because Ai is a live-in apprentice. Even Big Sis treats me like a criminal.

Rumors seem to be making their way around the Internet but But do I really have to declare it once and for all right here and now? I certainly think I don't.

Now, how do I convince Ms. Mato——?

“O-Oh, you know how it is! Once stories start circulating about how one of the lady-killers in the Shogi world like me is living with a grade schooler, it'll be quite a shock to all the young ladies who just started watching Shogi, don't you think?!”

“..... Very true.”

“No, no, no! I set myself up for a joke so perfectly that you'll leave me hanging if you don't drop the punchline! Let me have it, I'm begging you!”

“There's a break in the action. Let's change our focus to Miss Yashajin's match.”

“Ohhh, come on!!”

In Ai Yashajin (amateur) vs. Rei Kayunita 3-*dan*, Miss Yashajin, on offense, started the match with a Bishop Exchange. The battle is intense.

Kayunita is a skilled player with title match experience. She's coming off two consecutive victories following being seeded in the first round, but her skill alone makes her worthy of a challenge match seed.

Just like Miss Hinatsuru, Miss Yashajin is a fourth-grade elementary school student and apprentice to Kuzuryu-ryuo. She has won all three of her matches thus far using Bishop Exchange strategies. It's a normal Bishop Exchange style this time and she is maintaining a lead.

Kuzuryu-ryuo, “I lead at night.”

“I didn’t say that!!”

“I know. Because I haven’t asked yet.”

“Then why did you write that?!”

“Tell me about Ai Yashajin.”

“Ai is a clever girl. She’s fiercely independent even though she’s only in grade school and gets better and better without me teaching her much at all. That’s the best kind of apprentice, don’t you think? But enough about her, do something about that comment——.”

Miss Yashajin has already secured victory.

***Trashryu-ryuo*, “Grade schoolers are the best!”**

“I did ***not*** say that!! Shouldn’t you be asking me about the match instead?! That’s the kind of thing the audience wants to read?! And my name!! My name's Kuzuryu, not traaaaaaaash!!”

“Let me be perfectly honest with you. I can analyze matches myself, so I don’t need to ask.”

“Then why do you need me?! You’re more than good enough to do commentary on your own”

Shogi journalists need to have a decent level of Shogi skill to do their job. While it’s not a requirement, having a thorough understanding of the game means they can provide more detailed descriptions. So, it’s pretty common for skilled players to become journalists.

As a result, many of them are former Sub League members or had great success as amateurs. Sometimes, they’re stronger than Women’s League players.

Even Ms. Mato here is good enough to hold her ground against average Women’s League members. She should’ve handled all this on her own from the start

“Did you call me over here for some other reason?”

“I wanted to know more about the Ryuo’s precious apprentices. That and——.”

“And?”

“What effect these apprentices are having on the Ryuo, yes?”

Returning to Miss Hinatsuru vs. Hannuki, the defensive Miss Hinatsuru has compiled a string of favorable moves to take the lead. Using that sensitivity her Master takes pride in, she is closing in on victory.

Hannuki threatened an attack by placing a Bishop at ♖ 8 Five, but Miss Hinatsuru calmly adjusted to shield Hannuki’s target. The opening is already gone.

“Ryuo? What do you make of this sequence?”

“Surprising”

“What is?”

“I’ve never seen Ai this determined to *win*.”

Watching her almost machine-like Shogi on the tablet, I’m not sure what to make of my apprentice’s beastly transformation.

Ai has always won with a burst of speed in the late game up until now.

But today, her Shogi is so much different.

She’s cutting off her opponents left and right, completely shutting down their attacks before they can start.

She’s playing Shogi with her eyes on victory the instant the race gets underway.

“Indeed I suppose all that’s left is to wait for Ms. Hannuki to surrender and just enjoy the rest of the match.”

“Nah. It’s already over.”

“Huh?”

“Ai can put her in checkmate by placing a Pawn at 7 Seven.”

“Oh, yes!! B-But Do you think a grade school student will be able to read that?”

“Ai can. Trust me.”

The next update on my tablet seconds later showed——  7 Seven Pawn.

That’s when an overwhelming onslaught hits Ms. Hannuki like a tidal wave.

It was like a boxer threw a knockout punch but kept their opponent standing upright with a flurry of haymakers. Ai still had plenty of waiting time, but she didn’t use any of it moving in for the kill. She’s not giving her opponent any time to think. This is rough. Ms. Hannuki can’t even find a good time to throw in the towel or make the right moves to hold out.

Ms. Mato got so caught up in that skillful, blindingly fast assault that she forgot to post any comments. The updates are coming in one after another while she’s watching on the edge of her seat, hardly breathing at all.

Until finally the updates stop.

With a long sigh, Ms. Mato starts pressing keys once again.

“Ryuo.”

“Yes?”

“She’s too strong.”

Hannuki has surrendered. The match concluded at 2:05 p.m. Waiting time use finished with Hannuki at 15 minutes, Hinatsuru at 8 (both started with 15).

The fourth-grade student, Miss Hinatsuru is victorious.

She has earned a place in the preliminary match by defeating four Women's League players in succession in her tournament debut.

A fearsome talent on par with her Master, Yaichi Kuzuryu-ryuo, and her Master's elder sister apprentice, Ginko Sora-Women's Queen, has arrived on scene.

INTERVIEW

“Please look this way!”

“How do you feel after your victories today?!”

“Any thoughts on the preliminary match?!”

Ai Hinatsuru and Ai Yashajin were the center of attention during the post-final block match interviews in one of the smaller rooms.

Of course they were. How could they not be——?

“..... Did it. Four in a row ...,” I mumble to myself, stunned as I watch the excited adults swarm in on my apprentices, camera flashes going off nonstop.

Part of me thought it was possible, but——.

“Miss Yashajin! At nine years and seven months old, you are the youngest girl to ever advance to the Preliminaries. Your thoughts?!”

“Nothing much.”

“Who did you celebrate with first after your victory?!”

“My Master. He happened to be close by.”

“T-That four-game win streak, how did you do it? Did did your Master, the Ryuo, give you any specific strategies?”

“I think that my opponents simply weren’t that good.”

With a bouquet of flowers that everyone advancing to the Preliminaries receives in her arms, Ai Yashajin answers questions from journalists with the same kind of merciless tact she used during her matches.

She sounded arrogant to me, but the journalists——.

“Saying something like that after dominating Kayunita Women’s 3-*dan*”

“That’s a real prodigy

“So cute.”

“The birth of a new heroine!”

“If only she’d humiliate me.”

“What a cute kid.”

Rather than getting angry, they’re putting her up on a pedestal. There was a weird guy in there somewhere though

In the Shogi world, youth is the greatest sign of talent. Possessing the ability to speak your mind in front of others and having an up-front, blunt personality is also seen as a talent.

But there’s another, more important talent for Women’s League players—.

“Pathetic ingrates, do your jobs! How can you not see that My Lady is cutest at this angle?! There, see?!”

“W-Who do you think you are?!”

Akira bursts into the room and starts telling the journalists exactly how to take pictures. The real icing on the cake is that she wrestled away one of their cameras and started taking pictures herself.

The one talent that reigns supreme for Women’s League players—their *looks*.

The real reason that Ai and Ai are this popular is because the two of them are cute girls to begin with. In a way, their looks alone could be worth more to the Women’s League than their Shogi talent.

I’m sure it’ll be on display at the Preliminaries.

“C-Could you repeat that?! Y-You said you started Shogi only seven months ago?!”

The journalists interviewing Ai Hinatsuru couldn’t hide their shock.

Who could? I'm their Master, I know these two better than anyone else and I'm stunned.

I had a feeling that Ai Yashajin would play without taking many risks going against Women's League players, that she had a chance to win if she could use her favorite playing styles.

But I never expected Ai Hinatsuru to win four in a row.

"Was today really the first time you played against Women's League players without a handicap? A-And you won four in a row?!"

"Your favorite strategy is the Double Wing Attack?! So then, you're part of the Static Rook party Huh?! You play Ranging Rook too?!"

The journalist is beyond surprised, more like bewildered at this point.

An elementary school girl. A nine-year-old.

Been playing Shogi for seven months. Zero tournament appearances.

A girl with that background just cut down Women's League players with decades worth of experience.

"And all with perfect match records."

Ai has always been the stereotypical *come from behind* type of player.

I don't think she's looking down on her opponents, more like there's a part of her that's thinking *I'll just come back and win later if I fall behind in the early game!* Basically, she's a slow starter. She paid less attention to early-game standards, and that drove me up the wall.

But today—her early game was flawless.

"I, uh I'm still not very good and have so much more to learn but I *will* win in the Preliminaries!!"

Asked for thoughts on the preliminary match in two weeks, Ai spoke with all the strength she could muster.

I thought she'd be really shy, nothing more than a nervous wreck surrounded by all these journalists, but she's knocking these interviews out of the park.

Maybe it's the tournament that's motivating her?

I mean, she was zoned in this morning and she stayed surprisingly quiet after winning her matches. Usually she comes to find me when she wins, wanting compliments like an excited puppy wagging its tail

I have no idea when it happened, but it looks like she grew up.

While it makes me proud to see her like this I'm also kind of sad.

"..... She could've wanted my attention and made me worry a little longer"

Those words came out before I knew it. But, just as they did.

"Miss Hinatsuru, you are one of the Ryuo's apprentices just like Miss Yashajin, are you not?"

"Yes, I am!"

"Do you have many opportunities to learn from him?"

"Yes! Lots and lots!"

"As in, on the weekends?"

"Every day!!"

"E-Every day?"

"Yes!! He teaches me every day at home!!"

Oh.

Crap.

"Do you mean your home, Miss Hinatsuru?"

"Master's home!"

"HUH?!"

“He teaches me the most right after bath time! Then we solve Shogi puzzles in bed! Oh, and recently he’s been blow-drying my hair as a reward when I win——.”

“S-STOOOOP! STOP RIGHT THE———RE!!”

I charge in, desperate to shut down the interview but, “Ryuo! Please explain the details!”

“Is it true that you are bringing an elementary school girl into your place of residence?!”

“Are the lolicon rumors true?!”

“Are you cheating on the Women’s Queen?!”

Crap, crap, CRAP!!

“Ho-hold up a second! This is all a misunderstanding! What she means by me teaching her at home is——the Internet! I teach her over the Internet! And I have no relationship with Big Sis whatsoever!”

“That’s right! Master and Sora-*sensei* aren’t together and the only ones who spend the night are Grade Schooler Practice Group members!!”

“Ai!! Please be quiet!!”

“Uwhee!? Mguhgh!!”

I clamp my apprentice’s mouth shut in a panic, but it’s already too late.

“Grade Schooler Practice Group?!”

“You mean there are more?!”

“What is going on, Ryuo?!”

“Do you have a thing for young girls?!”

“Have you been teaching them more than just Shogi?!”

The journalists start asking harder questions one after another It wasn’t

long before they turned my apprentice's interview session into an all-out lolicon investigation.

What Keika said to me back in the bullet train this morning runs through the back of my mind.

The Shogi world is going to be turned on its head once these two take center stage. They might even get on the national news like Ginko.

Yep. Sure did.

SECOND CHANCE

When all was said and done, I managed to avoid all the journalist's sharp advances and hide the fact that Ai Hinatsuru lives with me but—.

"..... People are going to find out sooner or later"

Nothing inappropriate is going on, none But, I mean, look at all that's happened recently

With the interview ending on that note, we head back to the arena just in time to catch the final match of the tournament's Second Chance Block getting started.

"When you're ready."

Keika and Rei Kayunita Women's 3-*dan* breathe and bow in unison.

Keika switches on the chess clock.

Which means she's on defense.

"..... Ms. Kayunita has the first move. This could be a tough fight"

I'd been feeling a bit restless after the interviews, but that disappeared all at once.

Ai reaches for my shirt, a worried look on her face But pulls her hand back and says, "Keika She looks so tired"

"I don't blame her. This is her sixth match today"

Keika was transferred to the Second Chance Block after losing her first match, but she's won four straight since then. She'll punch a ticket to the preliminary match with one more win. That's how far she's come.

The only reason she's done so well is because *she lost that first match*.

She was practically frozen with nerves before the matches began, but losing

shattered the ice. That allowed her Shogi to let loose, in a good way. Could call it desperation too.

And she rode that wave from the bottom of the Second Chance Block all the way to the top.

I'm sure it wasn't easy. The final match has just started, and she's already out of breath. Her hair is all frayed and her eyes have turned beet red. She's way past her limit.

On the other hand, Ms. Kayunita is only playing her fourth match of the day because she was seeded.

I know she's feeling the pain and humiliation that come from losing to an unknown amateur still in elementary school, but she's not letting it break her concentration. Not only does she have skills, her spirit is so strong that I can feel it.

"Oh, that's the Women's League player I just showed how to lose," her bouquet now in Akira's arms, Ai Yashajin says as she walks up next to me without a sound, "That's her. Pretty strong, right?"

"Not at all."

"....."

"I'm confident I could play against her one hundred times and not lose a single match."

Ai has lost to Keika in the past.

That's why, despite being the most backhanded vote of confidence I've ever heard she's supporting Keika in her own way. At least, she might be.

The match progresses while we are talking, and Ms. Kayunita reveals her strategy.

"Bishop Exchange Fourth-File Rook by the look of it," I whisper under my breath.

Ai Hinatsuru then asks me in a hurried voice, “W-What kind of strategy is that?!”

“An aggressive style of Ranging Rook that executes a Bishop Exchange as soon as possible. There was a time when it was extremely popular with amateurs and pros. You move your Rook into the fourth column once the Bishops are gone and then shift it over to face your opponent’s Rook directly: Opposing Rook.”

“Uwhee? That’s weird Shogi.”

“Very true. Lots of players hate how many moves it takes to set up, so they use a different sequence to set up Opposing Rook much faster I don’t think anyone in the Women’s League plays that way though.”

“Why don’t they?”

“You need a lot of talent to pull it off.”

That’s not the case with Bishop Exchange Fourth-File Rook because people have researched all sorts of standards for it in the past few years. That research goes pretty deep. It’s always dangerous to play along with an opponent’s strategy without knowledge.

Sure enough——.

“Keh!”

Keika makes a sound somewhere between a groan and a sigh. She’s hurting. They’re only thirty moves in and she’s already down to a minute and a half of waiting time.

She knows she’s in trouble, but it’s too late to do anything about it. Keika has used so much more time.

Ms. Kayunita’s research has her outmatched.

“Ms. Kayunita She’s going all in on a power play. So much for having mercy on amateurs”

“K-Keika!”

Ai squeezes her hands together like she’s offering up a prayer.

But it wasn’t answered. Keika’s formations never really took shape as the later stages of the mid-game turned into an uphill battle.

“Nh Nhhh!”

Keika uses every remaining second of her waiting time to plan her attack and charges out to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat.

For a moment, it looked like she had a chance But after a few more moves, it was clear Keika was sliding straight toward a hellish defeat.

“Agh?!”

—Put in check and lost her Promoted Rook.

That wasn’t some airheaded *oops*. She’s so exhausted she didn’t see it. A fatal mistake.

“..... What is she doing?!”

Ai Yashajin is getting frustrated and snaps her tongue.

With her Promoted Rook taken without a fight, honestly, Keika can’t win.

However—that hopelessness must have lit her spirit on fire, because her energy comes back with a vengeance.

“.....!!”

Keika keeps playing. Lower lip pinned between her teeth, she keeps making moves.

She’s fighting back the same way a cornered kid would hurl toys or anything they could reach while throwing a fit and crying their heart out.

“Tsk! Give up already.”

Keika’s stubborn stalling has clearly gotten on Ms. Kayunita’s nerves.

But, she's handling it like an experienced Women's League 3-*dan* should. Rather than collapsing in anger, she strings together a fiery series of best moves in the thirty seconds she has between turns.

"M-Master Keika's ... already"

"Yeah. Move that Promoted Rook to 2 Three And it's over."

Keika held out as long as she could, but Ms. Kayunita is one move away from taking the win.

And it looks like Keika knows it too.

"..... Aghh"

Her fighting spirit is gone. It's completely and totally burned out.

I bet she's going to throw in the towel after this move.

"..... Uh-hm Uh-hm"

Kayunita Women's 3-*dan* is reading the board, using those seconds to make sure this is the end. Waiting until the last instant, she picks up the piece and snaps it down on 2 Three.

Then, the moment she took her hand away from it.

"I lo——."

Keika was just about to surrender, already lowering her head into a bow, but she stopped in mid-word And thrust her head out over the board, her eyes wide open.

"Huh?"

"Huh?"

"Huh?"

Keika, the match recorder, and Ms. Kayunita, the one who put the piece down, say in disbelief.

The piece at 2 Three wasn't a *Promoted Rook*.

But a——*Rook*.

"Huuuuh?!"

"Huh?"

"Huh?"

The three of us watching the match are just as shocked.

As unbelievable as it is, Ms. Kayunita flipped her Promoted Rook over before putting it back down on the board!

A *Rook getting de-promoted* simply doesn't exist, like a Pawn moving backwards. Therefore, it's an *impossible move*. Since she's already taking her hand away, there's nothing she can do about it now.

Of course, she broke the rules. Not Shogi rules *per se*, but

".....!"

It looked like Ms. Kayunita was going to grab her Rook for a moment but——she places her hand on her piece stand right away and lowers her head.

"I lost."

"Ah"

Keika bows back out of reflex. But I don't think what just happened has sunk in yet.

The judge sitting board-side stops the clock and declares, "..... ended. On the 170th move, Ms. Kiyotaki wins by default."

A heavy silence fills the arena for the next few seconds.

Until finally, Ms. Kayunita squeezes out a few words while glaring at the

board, “..... Pardon me”

“D-Don’t mention it” It was all Keika could do, responding without looking up from her bow.

A review session looks highly unlikely.

With her back against the wall, King completely surrounded and hopeless, she won by a rule violation. That difference between victory and defeat is Shogi in a nutshell. One move can turn everything around.

But this is going beyond what Ms. Kayunita can handle.

Coming off a crushing defeat to Ai Yashajin right before this match, she looked surprisingly composed.

But I can tell her heart took a great deal of damage.

Losing to two amateurs in one day is unacceptable. That mindset put extra pressure on her and showed up on the board as a rule violation at the last possible moment.

After being dominated by Ai Yashajin, Ms. Kayunita *had to* dominate Keika in this match. She built a massive lead in the early game but wouldn’t be satisfied without the perfect checkmate to end it.

The reason was simple: Ms. Kayunita is a Women’s League player and Keika is an amateur.

As a pro player myself, I can relate so well it hurts. Therefore, I can attribute Keika’s win to my second apprentice. I turn to her and say, “..... This is all thanks to you.”

“Please don’t say such disgusting things. You’ll make me sick.”

She knew what I meant, but still had a snappy comeback.

I thank her with a nice pat on the head, but Ai, her proud ladylike self, gets angry. “Don’t pet me!”

Adorabibble.

“Ugh! K-Keika I’m so glad! So, so glad!”

Akira is crying so hard that everyone around us is inching away.

Why would she get so red-faced over this? It seemed strange at first, but thinking it over, she’s been going to the Practice League meetings every time with Ai. She’s seen what people who devote their lives to Shogi are like and even learned how to play herself. I bet she’s happy to see one of the Practice League members get closer to becoming a pro.

Then——.

“Excuse me, Ms. Kiyotaki. All preliminary match participants need to be interviewed, so please follow me.”

“Huh?”

Keika glances up from the board when a staff member called her name. She looks like she just woke up from a dream.

“I-I’m in the Mynavi Preliminaries?”

“Congratulations. The last slot is yours.”

“.....”

Staggering to her feet, Keika tries to step forward but almost loses her balance. Did she forget how to walk?

Ai Hinatsuru dashes out to catch her.

“Congratulations, Keika! Let’s win the next one together!!”

“..... Yes, let’s.”

Camera flashes surround the final heroine as she shows up late for her interview.

Asked for a few words on her thoughts going into the Preliminaries, Keika

looked like she needed a pinch to make sure she wasn't dreaming. Even still, she clenches that bouquet tightly to her chest and says, "I'm so happy for the opportunity to play against former Practice League members who entered the Women's League before me. I will do my best so that when it's all over they can look at me and say, *You've gotten stronger.*"

That's how the 11th Mynavi Women's Open Challenge Matches came to a close.

There were seventy participants at the beginning. Only eleven of them advanced to the Preliminaries, but only three of those eleven were amateurs.

RECORD 2

A y a n o S a d a t o u

AYANO SADATOU

DATE OF BIRTH: DECEMBER 3RD

BLOOD TYPE: O

HOMETOWN: KYOTO CITY, KYOTO

SPECIALTIES: PENMANSHIP
JAPANESE KOTO

FAVORITE FOOD: WATERMELON
(BUT HAS BED-WETTING PROBLEMS THE FOLLOWING NIGHT.)



SENDAGAYA

Mio and Ayano, at the front of the group, start talking the moment we step inside the shrine grounds.

“Whoa! What’s that?! There’s a huge Shogi piece sticking out of the ground?!”

“It’s Hatomori Shrine’s *Shogidou* hut! There are pictures of it on live Shogi blogs during matches!”

The day after the challenge matches.

Our group met up with Mio, Ayano and Charlette to visit the Shogi Association in Sendagaya, Tokyo.

Being that everyone in the Grade Schooler Practice Group is on summer vacation, we decided to take a *Kanto field trip* to play Shogi all day at the association’s classroom.

Normally, grade schoolers would go to theme parks or pools on summer break but all these girls love Shogi.

Wouldn’t it be fun to go to the Tokyo Association?!

And that pretty much settled it.

Since we were already in Tokyo, today turned out to be the day.

We went to pick up the three girls at Tokyo station, but as soon as we got off at Sendagaya, they started saying, “Are there any professional *Senseis* around?!” with their heads on a swivel. Visiting Shogi’s holy ground has them pumped up.

..... I’d like to point out that there’s a titleholder walking right behind them. It’s kind of sad that they’ve gotten this used to me.

“Just like Ayano said, Hatomori Shrine and the Shogi Association have been connected at the hip for a long time.”

Feeling very much like a teacher during a field trip, I explain all this to the girls in front of the small, shed-like building called *Shogidou*.

“Kanto players come here in a big group on New Year’s Day and join the dancers during the *Obon* holidays.”

“They do?!!”

It’s not just the pros. Many amateurs participate too, of course.

People can only buy special Shogi Empowerment *Ema* Plates here. Normal *ema* are wooden plates like a flat pentagon with paintings of horses on them, but these each have a Shogi piece drawn on them instead. People write their wishes on the plates and string them up in trees, but the standard here is to hang them on the building itself.

I buy some for the girls at the shrine’s shop and they start writing.

To have an eight-match winning streak in the Practice League!

I want to have a stronger late game.

Bwe Own Dan.

They were hanging up their plates before I knew it. I’m pretty sure that last one says: *Be 1-dan*. Charlette has such cute handwriting ≡

“What’d you write, Ai?”

“Uwhee?! D-Do I have to show you?”

“It doesn’t matter either way. I’ll find it myself later.”

“Ughh Master, you meanie”

Giving up, Ai Hinatsuru lets me have a look.

For everyone to go to the Mynavi Finals together!! Everyone!!

She practically carved the ink into the plate. That's my girl.

But Was she always this eager to win?

I got a sense of it during the challenge matches, but this desire for *victory* rather than *do her best* is something I'd never seen in her Shogi before.

Why the sudden change? Well, it's natural to want to win it all after a good start in a tournament Lost in thought, I lead the girls out of the shrine.

Hatomori Shine behind us, the association is right there.

"You know, Cha? Cha's never been to the Twokyo Shogi Association before!!"

"Me too, me too! I've only seen pictures!"

"This is my first time as well! The building is gorgeous!"

"It's the same color as the Kansai Association! Ah! But it's missing the big letters on the wall."

"Putting ugly letters on the side of buildings isn't normal. Only people in Kansai do that."

"R-Really? I think they're really cool"

Ai Yashajin's comments are as harsh as ever, but just like when Ai Hinatsuru invited her to do Shogi puzzles back in the train, she restrains herself and ends up coming along, saying, "We might as well see what they can do while we're here." It's so cute how she says one thing but really wants the other. Of course, Akira is with her.

"My Lady! Allow me to photograph you in front of the association! A big smile! Peace! Peace!"

"Akira, you're making a scene"

"It's no problem. Now come on, everyone. Get in the picture! Peace!"

"Pweace!"

“P-Peace

In the end, Ai Yashajin ended up right in the middle of the Grade Schoolers Practice Group picture.

Her grumbling face between all their smiles actually makes her look even cuter.

I was just like them, giddy with excitement when I came up here for the Elementary Meijin Title Match

Just as I was enjoying all the memories, “You have work to do today, right Yaichi? The title match coverage.”

“Yeah. I got asked to do some commentary for the Emperor Title Match Sorry, Keika. Making you look after the girls by yourself like this.”

“Coverage?”

Ai Hinatsuru looks at me, confused. “Uwhee?” Adorable.

“I’m sure you know the video site *Nico Nico*, right? They have a streaming service called *Nico Live* that covers Shogi title matches: first move to the last.”

“Huh?! B-But can’t title matches go on for more than ten hours?”

“Of course. But it’s not like they’re only showing the players and the board. Commentators provide analysis of each move and also take questions from the crowd or talk about strategy during slow parts of the match. A lot of planning goes into it.”

“And you’ll be working alongside a Women’s League player, yes?” Keika kindly adds.

“So, Ai, that means you can work with Yaichi for *Nico Live* once you join the Women’s League too. The harder you practice now, the sooner that day will come.”

“Work with Master?” Ai softly whispers like she’s dreaming

I’m fully aware that that day is coming up fast.

I thought it was much farther down the road until I saw Ai play yesterday

“..... But, we’ve still got to celebrate your victories in the challenge matches!”

I put my hand on Ai’s head and say in a cheerful voice to chase away the sudden lonely ache in my chest, “Why don’t we go out for crab once we’re back in Osaka?”

“Crab?!”

Her eyes light up at the mere mention of her favorite food in the world, but she suddenly comes back to herself with an “Ah?!” and shakes her head side to side.

“N- No! It’s too soon to celebrate! It wouldn’t be worth it!!”

“Are you sure? But——.”

Just as I was about to tell her she’s earned a proper reward.

“Everyone——! Let’s hurry inside!” Ayano, a few steps ahead of the group, is halfway inside the doorway and waving at us. All the girls rush in after her.

“Whoa! The gift shop is huge!!” They’re excited, I can hear it.

“I will go practice hard in the classroom, so please do your best at work, Master.”

With that, Ai gives me a small bow before chasing after the other girls.

She looks older somehow, disappearing down the hallway——.

But, yeah, the Master definitely feels a little lonely.

LIVE COVERAGE

“A good morning to everyone joining us today for the 3rd Emperor Title Match from the Neo Awaji Hotel on Awaji Island. Each and every move will be broadcast in real time. I, Women’s League member Tamayo Rokuroba, will be providing commentary.”

A stunning young woman politely bows to the camera and then turns to introduce me.

“And now for today’s guest commentator, Yaichi Kuzuryu-Ryuo. *Sensei*, it’s lovely to have you with us.”

“Oh, thank you. It’s great to be here.”

“Today is Kuzuryu-*sensei*’s first appearance on *Nico Live*. It sure looks like the audience can’t wait to get started this morning.”

The feed switches from us to a different camera overlooking the arena.

“This is a live view but It looks like neither player has entered the arena as of yet. However, Kiyotaki 9-*dan* is here as an observer and match recorder Kunugi Sub League 1-*dan* is ready to begin.”

“Yes. There’s my Master.”

Since there’s a computer monitor on the floor in front of us, we can see exactly what the online viewers are seeing. So it’s easy comment on everything.

“Ah! Kiyotaki-*sensei* is standing up?”

“It looks like his cushion wasn’t quite lined up right. Master might not look it, but he’s very particular about details——.”

“He sure seems like it. Kiyotaki-*sensei* nods with satisfaction and has retaken his seat.”

“That’s a relief.”

“Ah!! Is it just me, or does he look a little restless?”

“The players will be making their entrance any minute, so I hope he settles down.”

“Kiyotaki 9-*dan* has stood up again and left the arena in a hurry. Kuzuryu-*sensei*, what is going on?”

“I don’t want to assume but It’s possible the pre-match jitters have gotten to him and he needs to make a trip to the restroom.”

“Are you serious?! Th-there’s only one, maybe two minutes left before the match starts?!”

“A bad move, to be sure. This will come back to haunt him.”

“Oh no! The players have arrived! They’ve started lining up pieces without the observer present!”

“Just great”

“I-I really hope he makes it back in time for the first move but Kuzuryu-*sensei*. How do you expect this to play out?”

“Traditional kimono clothing makes doing your business take a while, so I honestly think he’s in a very difficult situation.”

“What’s this? The players are speaking with the match recorder. All three bow in unison And ... the first move for today’s match goes to the challenger!”

“There’s no telling when he’ll be back, so they must’ve decided to get started. Very professional.”

“T-The 88th Season 3rd Emperor Title Match is underway!”

..... The match started off weirdly enough, but Master running in to the arena half naked and clutching his undone kimono five minutes into it and being

escorted out on the spot certainly spiced things up. The players, however, calmly stuck to the standards.

“Kuzuryu-*sensei*, any thoughts on the match thus far?”

“Having a streaker as an observer was a real surprise.”

“Pwff! Ahh, *Sensei*?! Please don’t make me laugh!!”

But I’ve got to say——.



..... Her boobs are huge

“Is something wrong? Um, I’d really prefer it if you were looking at the camera”

“Agh?! I-It’s nothing! I’m not looking at anything!!”

“? Everyone tends to get a little stiff their first time. You can relax.”

“No! This is my first time, but I’m not stiff! I absolutely guarantee you that I am not stiff whatsoever!!”

“Y-You aren’t? Anyway I’ll lead, so do whatever you’re comfortable with, okay *Sensei*?”

“G-Go ahead”

“Sure, as you wish♪ He-he-he.”

Ms. Rokuroba looks at me with a reassuring smile to calm me down.

S-So cute! But that conversation, it felt a little *adult* Why?! Because of those boobs?!

Tamayo Rokuroba Women’s 2-*dan*.

Twenty years old and registered with the Kanto Shogi Association. A college girl in her prime. And those boobs Those massive boobs!

Ms. Rokuroba is an extremely popular Women’s League player (boobs) whose fans have lovingly dubbed her *Tamayon*. She makes regular appearances on *Nico Live*, and apparently views go up by more than 100,000 whenever she’s on.

With the exception of Big Sis, she’s the most popular female player right now (boobs).

..... But pros have a different nickname for her, one a bit more unsettling.

I’m not sure who started it but it’s—*Practice Session Crusher*.

For whatever reason, the Practice Sessions she’s involved in tend to fizzle out

rather quickly.

She's got some skills and is drop-dead gorgeous Why would that be?

I remember watching her commentary one time with Big Sis and offhandedly said, "Ms. Rokuroba's pretty good. Oh, her commentary, I mean. Just her commentary."

Big Sis then replied with this deep nugget, "Maybe it looks that way to brain-dead men."

She then, of course, nailed my shin with a tenacious kick. I guess that means Big Sis knows why Ms. Rokuroba is called the *Practice Session Crusher*. That's kind of scary.

..... Well, I'm registered in Kansai, so it's not like she'd ever ask me to do a Practice Session anyway.

Then, just as my train of thought got that far.

[Please introduce the players.]

A member of *Nico Nico*'s staff holds up a cue card behind the camera.

"The defender in today's match is Taishi Shinokubo-*Emperor*, currently twenty-three years old. He claimed the *Emperor* title a year ago at this time, his first, and has maintained his spot as one of the top young Shogi professionals in the Kanto area."

Looking very much in her element, Ms. Rokuroba introduces the Emperor first.

"All his magnificent Shogi skills are well known. He is also talented academically and graduated from Keio University at the top of his class. Called *Lord Taishi* by the Shogi faithful, he has made many appearances on TV news programs as well as providing commentary for Shogi broadcasts. Kuzuryu-sensei what's your impression of the Emperor?"

"Mr. Shinokubo? Well——."

—I hope somebody'll knock him off his throne!

As someone who never went to high school, I'm jealous as hell of a member of the handsome elite who graduated from a big name university at the top of his class. But, coming right out and saying that will start some intense flame wars.

"..... His handsome looks are only matched by his handsome Shogi skills. With his passion for research and great talent, I think he's incredible."

"I see, I see~."

Ms. Rokuroba nods and presses for more than my unenthusiastic grade school level book report of an answer.

"But you're even more incredible in terms of talent, Kuzuryu-sensei!"

"Huh? Me?"

"Don't look so surprised! At sixteen years old, you are the youngest Ryuo in history! Not to mention, only the fourth junior high school professional ever?! Every member of this generation of Shogi professionals in Kanto has their eyes on you! And, of course, Women's League members too!"

"T-They do?"

"Is that not the case in Kansai?"

"Umm To be honest, Big Sis gets so much attention that"

"Your elder sister apprentice, someone our viewers are very familiar with, Ginko Sora—Dual Title, yes?"

Once Ms. Rokuroba said that to the camera, white letters start rolling across the monitor.

Naniwa's Snow White.

Lady Gin!

Get her on Nico Live.

All of these are comments typed out by people watching this broadcast. It sure seems like Big Sis has a large following on *Nico Live*. That's only because they don't know what she's really like

"What's this? It seems that bringing up Ginko Sora got everyone's attention this morning, don't you think?" remarks Ms. Rokuroba.

New comments start pouring in almost immediately, this time saying:

I'm more of a Tamayon fan myself!

Tamayon is the best!

Tamayo~n!

This lighthearted interaction is one of *Nico Live*'s charms.

—*Nico Live* charges money for three things: anime, politics and Shogi—.

Both the Shogi world and *Nico Live* benefit quite a bit from this partnership.

It used to be that only younger people were interested in *Nico Live*. Adding Shogi to their lineup brought in older viewers, people with lots of extra time and money on their hands. Their premium membership sales went way up.

As a result, Shogi got a new fandom at the same time.

"Since her younger brother apprentice is doing commentary, do you think that Miss Sora is watching *Nico Live* at this very moment?"

"Big Sis wouldn't spend time watching my commentary, trust me. Now let's get back to the match."

"My apologies Now would be the time to introduce the challenger but——."

"He doesn't ... The Meijin."

"Very true."

The fact that he's so great means we can leave his intro at that: this shows

how amazing he is.

“Speaking of the Meijin, he also has the *Throne* and *Ban-oh* titles. Should he also take the *Emperor* title, he’ll have over half of the seven Shogi titles to his name.”

“If this were anyone else, it would be a big deal. But for him, it’s more like he’s just *in a groove* recently. It’s truly impressive.”

“Should he take the *Emperor* title, he’ll have a communicative 99 seasons as a titleholder. Correct me if I’m wrong, but is that why there’s nearly double the number of media present today?”

“Shinokubo-*Emperor* has already lost two matches, so a lose today means his title would go to the Meijin I hope he puts up a last stand for the ages.”

While I would love for him to get a reality check, it’s not that simple for me.

Should the Meijin complete a three-match sweep, there’s a good chance he’d use that momentum to claim another title.

100 seasons as a titleholder, that’s unknown territory He could become the first and last Eternal Septuple Title Holder.

And that next title would be——.

[Please use the big board to analyze the last few moves.]

“Now that the match has progressed, let’s look back on what’s happened so far Kuzuryu-*Ryuo*, would you be so kind as to analyze the current situation?”

“I’d be glad to. Let’s move to the big board——.”

Just as I was about to focus on Shogi.

“.....?!?!?!?”

I figured out the reason why Ms. Rokuroba is called the *Practice Session Crusher*, why it would be so difficult for people to keep playing against her. It’s

because—.

—They have to read the board without getting distracted by those gigantic boobs!

Commentators face each other while moving pieces around the big board during analysis.

Since I'm a bit taller than she is her cleavage always ends up in my line of sight no matter where I look!

"Sensei? Kuzuryu-sensei? You're stiffening up again"

"Pardon me! I need to concentrate, so I'm going to close my eyes!!"

"Okay?"

Shutting Ms. Rokuroba (mostly her boobs) out of my line of sight and thinking over the match, a major problem that male players have to deal with came to mind at the same time.

—That being *where to look when playing against a female player*.

Because seriously, we sit on our ankles and stare downwards the whole time, yeah?

So, it always stands out. The, um cleavage.

It's even worse on days when they wear a skirt just short enough that their knees show. Even keeping your eyes glued to the board won't help because those flashes of skin are always there in the corner It's extremely hard to keep focusing.

Looking up might sound like the solution, but you'd be looking right at their face. Then there's a risk she might start thinking: *What's with this guy? We're in the middle of a match, but he won't take his eyes off me Is he coming up to*

me? Things get awkward

What I'm trying to say is—we're screwed no matter where we look!

I play against Big Sis all the time, by the way, but never had this problem.

Why? Because she's flat up top and smooth down below, basically the same as a plastic cutting board. Anyone who would get turned on by a plastic cutting board is sick.

"Umm Kuzuryu-*sensei*? Our viewers are waiting——."

"..... I've got it."

"? As you know, the Meijin had the first move in today's match, but the game has turned into Side Pawn Capture, Shinokubo-*Emperor's* favorite strategy. What is your prediction for the next move?"

"Yes. I expected that we'd see this strategy today"

It's those boobs I didn't see coming.

"..... Mr. Shinokubo tends to play Bishop Exchange or Side Pawn Capture on offense but is staunchly Side Pawn Capture on defense. Also, the Meijin generally doesn't try to avoid his opponent's best strategies. That's especially true for strong, younger opponents."

"Ah, I see"

"Ms. Rokuroba, do you play Side Pawn Capture?"

"I-I can't say I do. I'm part of the Ranging Rook party So, my Static Rook research is a bit lacking"

"Don't worry. Side Pawn Capture almost never shows up in the Women's League or among amateurs, so it's usually pros figuring out the details."

"So, *Sensei*, what do you make of this situation? The Meijin looks to be considering the 4 Six Silver or the 7 Seven Gold——."

"Neither of those. Knowing him, I think the Meijin will play 7 Seven Bishop."

“What? The Bishop? Not the Gold?”

“Yes.”

“But the Rook would take the Pawn in front of the Bishop”

I think that’s the last move someone would think up.

If it were anyone but the Meijin, it’d be a horrible decision, a bad move that violates common sense——.

“Yes, that Pawn will get taken, but the Meijin already has one Pawn at his disposal. Sacrificing it to advance his Bishop gives his formation more flexibility. Then he can strengthen his defenses and take it slow. That’s the way the Meijin likes to play.”

“If you say so.”

“There’s only so much I can grasp through a monitor I’d get a much more accurate reading if I were at least in the same room”

“Huh? Each move has been accurately reported”

Ms. Rokuroba tilts her head, doubting what I just told her. But her eyes went wide as soon as the Meijin made his move.

“Ah! He did just that.”

The Meijin’s decision——just as I predicted, 7 Seven Bishop.

“*Sensei*?! Th-that was truly amazing!! Accurately anticipating that move when no one else was considering it!!”

“Haha. Honestly, I’m relieved.”

Kuzuryu, is he human?

Youngest Ryuo in history for a reason.

I guess it takes a prodigy to know one ...

Ms. Rokuroba and the comments take my side. D-Damn, this feels awesome

.....!

“There are a few ways for Mr. Shinokubo to go from here.”

Walking on air, I make another prediction with my face a bit more tensed up than usual.

“The easiest option would be for him to target the forward Bishop, but that could be exactly what the Meijin wants him to do. I believe that Mr. Shinokubo will play 3 Four Silver. However, two Bishops staring at each other like this is like the players pointing rifles at each other. You can’t move without thinking it all the way through It’s a battle of nerves.”

“So you’re saying it will be a while? Before the next move?”

“I think so. Oh look, Mr. Shinokubo broke his posture. This is where he’s going to spend waiting time to think.”

[Please read the messages.]

“Now that there’s a break in the match, we’ll take a moment to read messages from our viewers. *Sensei*, please have a seat.”

“Sure. I’ll slide in right here”

Leaving either side of the big board, we sit down side-by-side in chairs at a desk in front of it.

[Your faces are getting cut off. Please scoot closer together.]

“Oh Sure.”

I tried to leave a bit of space between us, but Ms. Rokuroba tells me, “*Sensei*? Don’t be a stranger. Come on in close.” The barrier I had disappeared into thin air and now we’re sitting close enough that my shoulder and elbow graze against hers.

Puff Woah, that’s some nice perfume. And, right next to my elbow, those gigantic boobs!

..... Holy crap, my heart is pounding. Palms are soaked with sweat

“I’ll read our first message. It’s from a woman in Osaka City.”

“S- Sure.”

“Kuzuryu-sensei, Ms. Rokuroba, I’ve been enjoying your commentary. The two of you have great chemistry and are a joy watch Did you hear that, Sensei? She said we had great chemistry.”

“Ah,ahaha. Yep, sure did

“Hehe≡ There’s more. *My question is for Kuzuryu-sensei.*”

“Sure. What is it?”

“You recently took a grade school girl as your apprentice, yes? I often hear that people see you with several grade school girls around the Kansai Shogi Association with a lewd expression on your face. However, I couldn’t help but notice you seem extremely enamored by Ms. Rokuroba’s large breasts while watching Nico Live today. It seems as though you are attracted to that type of woman as well. So, which is it, Sensei? Do you like breasts? Do you have a Lolita complex? I realize this is a very forward and difficult question to answer, but please answer with as much detail as you can. Pike you for your time that’s what she wrote.”

“.....”

..... Say, what?

They were so polite and proper at the beginning, but was there some anger in there? And what’s with that *pike* at the end? A typo? That wasn’t a curse, was it

“Um Kuzuryu-sensei? A Lolita complex means——.”

“N-No, absolutely not! Those grade schoolers are, you know! M-My apprentice’s friends And about my apprentice, her parents own the inn that hosted my title match, so I had no choice but to accept her. I didn’t take her

because I *prefer* elementary school girls or anything like that!”

“Is-is that so?”

“Yes, it is!”

“W-Well, what about me?”

“I didn’t catch that.”

“N-Nothing at all! It’s nothing!! Please forget about it!!!”

Ms. Rokuroba’s cheeks are burning red. She leans in and says very quietly, so that only I can hear, “..... I’m glad≡”

Glad about what?!!!! Tell me! I wanna knooooooooooooooooow!!

STEAK!

At about the same time Kuzuryu-*sensei* and a beautiful (well-endowed) Women's League player were engaging in playful banter—.

“Everyone played their hearts out at the classroom today, so let's have steak for lunch!”

“Yay! Steak!!”

Keika led all the members of the Grade Schooler Practice Group to a restaurant around the corner from the Shogi Association.

“CHOCO Amamiya.”

One of Sendagaya's most popular restaurants, it's a trendy destination frequented by famous people outside the Shogi world as well. Instantly recognizable by its brick storefront in the underground, one step inside is enough to know that *this place'll serve up something nice*.

But of course, that's not all.

“Woow! They grill everything there?!”

The restaurant's most prominent feature is that, rather than preparing meat in the kitchens, each meal is cooked on a grill that resembles a fireplace directly behind the customers in an awe-inspiring display! Each of the girls watched the flames dance, their mouths watering in anticipation. Even Akira, a full-grown adult, couldn't contain her excitement: “Woowie!!” and photographed the spectacle.

The group ordered a two-pound block of steak, had it grilled to perfection and looked on as their waiter sliced and served each piece. Since seven people were sharing the bill, the cost wasn't much different from an average restaurant's lunch menu.

“Dig in!”

“Everyone, be careful okay? It’s still very hot. Charlette, let me help you with that Okay, blow and say: *Ahh*.”

“Fww. Fww. Ahh!”

Once the steaming piece of meat was slightly cooler, Charlette eagerly chomped down with one big bite.

“So? Is it good?”

“Dewicious≡”

“My, my word Charlette is adorable! I get why Yaichi would take her as a bride ...,” Keika said to herself, showing some mercy for the boy’s preferences.

“Uwhee The outside is crisp and crunchy, but the inside is still rare and juicy. Both taste too good to be true!”

Ai Hinatsuru and the rest of the girls couldn’t have been happier with their steak.

“You know when you bite down, all the juices just go *whoosh*! I’ve never had meat that did that before!” said Mio with glee.

“The side salad is also delicious!”

“Humph I wasn’t expecting something this good for the price”

The sharp-tongued young lady Ai Yashajin seemed satisfied as well.

They had been so focused on Shogi that everyone was beyond starving by the time they sat down for lunch. Not realizing their stomachs were empty played a part, but everyone finished their meal in a matter of minutes.

But it didn’t end there!

“What?! Drinks and desserts come too?! Holy cow!”

“Hmm Life is good ≡”

“Sharbete is weally tasty!”

“It makes your mouth feel fresh, doesn’t it? I should get some sherbet ice cream for Master next time!”

Tired brains rested and stomachs full, they were ready to go back in to play even more Shogi.

“But I have to say, Ai, you were on a roll in the classroom!”

“Uwhee?!”

Ai jumped in surprise, not sure how to react to Mio’s compliment.

“D-do you think so? I can’t really tell myself”

“Of course you were! Getting matched up against all those strong people and winning every time! You were so zoned in and beat all of them so fast! You must’ve played, what, twice as many people as the rest of us did? Don’t you think so, Ayanon?”

“Yes! Though I thought it was only natural for you after defeating the Women’s League *Senseis* in Mynavi! I have much to learn from you!”

“Owhh. Ai, you were like a lwion.”

“Humph Come to think of it, your viciousness comes out when you eat meat too. Is that who you really are?”

“You too, Ai? Give me a break!!”

Seeing Ai’s red, pouting face sent a wave of laughter to the group. Their table became a heartwarming accent within the restaurant. The rest of the customers couldn’t help but smile as if looking at a beautiful bouquet of flowers.

As for the only one in the room not smiling, Ai thought: *I have to have to, have to win and get through the preliminary matches I have to get stronger, even stronger. That way, Master——.*

Ai clenched her fists in her lap.

Her spirit was alight She wanted nothing more than to go play Shogi this instant.

I'm going to play so much ... I want to get back to the classroom!

However.

Keika's offhanded remark as she looked at the smartphone in her hand while nonchalantly swirling her tea with the others would turn everything on its head. "Looks like the Emperor Title Match heated up in a hurry after their lunch break Yaichi's saying the Meijin already has a definite edge——."

"We can watch Master's broadcast on smartphones?! I want to see too!"

"Agh! B-But now might not be the best No, Ai! Don't——."

"Yay! There he is?"

There, on her phone's small screen, was Kuzuryu-sensei——.

"Now 3 o'clock, snacks are provided for the players. Therefore, it's about time that we had some snacks that the lovely *Nico Live* staff has prepared for us."

"Oh? Pudding? It looks delicious."

"Heey, Kuzuryu-sensei? Open wide≡"

"Huuuh?! M-May I? Ah Ahh≡"

——was sitting shoulder to shoulder with a Women's League player as she fed him.

"....."

Ai's expression hardened by the second.

On the other hand, Kuzuryu-sensei's was loosening to the point of looking lovestruck.

What's worse, his eyes weren't focused on the camera, on the woman's face, or even on the jiggy pudding in front of his mouth. They were locked on a

different type of jiggle.

Her breasts.

His line of sight was fixed to the Women's League player's impressive bust.

Should they shift to the right, his eyes shifted to the right.

Should they sway to the left, his eyes followed to the left.

Other viewers noticed as well, pointing out such embarrassing things as: *The Ryuo is boob-watching lol. Not even hiding it (haha). He's a teenager. Boys will be boys.* And more ...

This was unacceptable, Ai thought with every fiber of her being.

Unacceptable!

What kind of work is that?!

I've been being a good girl, but!

Master dara!!

"Um Everybody," Ai said as she looked up from the smartphone, a strange light glinting in the back of her eyes. "Before we go back to the classroom, I There's a place I want to go"

UNANNOUNCED

“So then, Kuzuryu-*sensei*, do you live close to the Kansai Shogi Association?”

“Yeah. In a tiny old apartment though.”

With players eating snacks live on air at 3 o’clock—better known as *Nico Live’s* popular segment *3 p.m. Time* over, Ms. Rokuroba and I spent our break together.

We talked about everything going on in our private lives the whole time When from out of nowhere, Ms. Rokuroba changes the subject with a very different look on her face.

“Um *Sensei*? I have a favor to ask you

“A favor?”

“Sometime, would you be willing to do a Practice Session, with me?”

“Say what?! A Practice Session?!”

“Yes! Yes please!”

Her eyes light up, twinkling like stars as she squeezes my hand.

“If it’s all right with you, I can stop by your apartment the next time I have a match in Kansai——.”

“Ho-hold on a second!”

While I would very much like to know what a Practice Session with Ms. Rokuroba would be like *Can she play well enough?* That could be a problem.

And even if she can—there’s another, much bigger problem.

——My apprentice lives in that apartment. My nine-year-old apprentice

The day she finds that out is the day she’s going to get the wrong idea about

me, and I know exactly what Ai would say if I brought a young woman home.
It's a Practice Session! Fat chance she'd believe me.

Sure, she's suddenly decided to act grown-up the past few days, but everything that happened when she first met Ai Yashajin was bad enough She threatened to interrogate me

"Ummm You coming to my place, is a little"

"Am I not good enough for you?"

"No! It's not that you're not good enough, not at all! It's just, Kansai players usually have Practice Sessions in classrooms, so——."

"In that case, how about tomorrow here in Tokyo? There are plenty of classrooms around——."

"T-Tomorrow Sorry, but I'm busy"

"Well, what about today?"

"Come again?! T-Today?!"

"Yes! As soon as we're done here, at my apartment."

"Y-Your?! Th- That can't be allowed, right?"

"It's fine! I live by myself too!"

Fine?! How could it be fine?! That's about as far from fine as you can get?!

But, hang on Both sides are willing, so Maybe, it'd be okay?

"Everything we'll need is already there and I can make dinner! Since you've got plans tomorrow in Tokyo, you're more than welcome to stay overnight!!"

"O-Overnight?!"

"Yep≡ You, Kuzuryu-sensei, are welcome to stay as many nights as you want≡"

Many nights?!

“S- Sorry You kind of caught me off guard, so I don’t know”

[Back on in two.]

Like a trainer throwing in the towel for his woozy boxer, the *Nico Live* staff couldn’t have timed that any better. With that cue card high in the air, this conversation got put on hold.

Ms. Rokuroba whispers into my ear.

“Well, *Sensei*. About that Practice Session Please think it over and let me know before we’re done, okay?”

“.....!”

Her voice is barely above a sigh. It’s making my heart race and the butterflies in my stomach go wild.

[A guest will join once we’re live.]

“Huh? Alright. We’ll resume coverage in a moment, but first we need to welcome our guest into the booth.”

Guest? That wasn’t in the schedule.

But then again, there’s too much going on in my head right now to do any quality Shogi analysis. Having a guest here would be great. I can just let them do commentary for a while At least, I thought so.

“Thank you for having me!”

That was Ai’s voice.

“..... Huh? Huuuh?!”

Who’s that?

Cutie!

An elementary school girl?

Cute!

Nico Live adopted a girl!

Good call, staff!

Comments pour in like a tidal wave. My heart is beating like a jackhammer.

It looks like Ms. Rokuroba wasn't expecting her either.

"Umm And who might you be?"

[Introduce yourself.]

"I'm Ai Hinatsuru. I'm a fourth grader."

Ai looks right at the camera and does a polite little bow.

"I play Shogi with Yaichi Kuzuryu-sensei at his home because I'm his live-in apprentice!!" she says with energetic glee. I feel like I'm gonna pass out.

"L-Live-in apprentice?! So, you're saying——."

"We live together."

"That's what I thought."

Sliiiiiiiiiide!

Ms. Rokuroba had been closing in on me, but now her heart is pulling away like the tide.

They live together? Did I hear that right?

Alone together with a fourth grader the hell?!

The Loli rumors were true.

"L-Listen, everyone, you've got it all wrong! She's——."

"Masta≡"

Just as I was about to extinguish the comment inferno, a voice came from

around my legs moments before a golden, fluffy something jumped onto my chest.

Charlette. Whaaaaat?!

“Cha, will swit in Masta’s wap.”

My god, she’s adorable!!

An angel has landed.

A miracle, right before our eyes

A new Shogi world has dawned.

The avalanche of grade schoolers has the audience going crazy. My time to rest in peace has come.

I don’t know how, but Ms. Rokuroba still has her sanity, enough to do her duty and ask questions as the host.

“K-Kuzuryu-sensei? Who Who is this foreign girl here?”

“You know? Cha, Cha is Mwast’s bwide.”

“..... Huh?”

It’s not just Ms. Rokuroba anymore. The whole staff is frozen like statues.

—Should, should we be broadcasting this?

They’re looking at each other, communicating with just their eyes and not a smile to be seen. Crap, crap, crap, CRAAAAAP!!

“Hey, hey. Cha ... wants snwacks.”

“Huh? Oh Here you go”

Charlette asks for the leftover pudding, and Ms. Rokuroba gives her the whole thing with a spoon.

No one can say no to Charlette. Charlette is, well, Charlette

“Yummy≡”

The camera captures a bit of the syrup dribbling down her chin and——.

I'm in loooooooooove!!

This stream could just be this girl eating food and I'd be fine with it.

Fifty hours of this right here please.

The Internet community got so excited that I'm starting to pull away.

What's more——.

"Oh, wow! So this is how they do *Nico Live*."

"A-Are we allowed to come in here?"

(Unreported) elementary school girls ... increasing. (My cause of death.)

"Mio and Ayano too?! Hey, hey director! Go to a commercial or something! How are we supposed to keep this under control?!!"

[We'll take a quick break——.]

"Oh!"

Mio stops her impromptu tour of the monitors in the room, staring at one like she just found a treasure chest.

"This is the viewer count, right? It's going way, way up"

"What?!"

Rather than writing a cue card, the director actually let his real voice slip out.

Then——

[Keep going.]

"What about that break! Stop, stop, stop!!"

[No stoppages until the final move!]

"That's a little much, don't you think?! What's the big idea, having grade school girls as guests on a Shogi program?!"

[Nico Live's big three are anime, politics and grade schoolers, so]

“That last one!! The laaaaast oooone!!”

When the heck did Shogi get replaced by grade schoolers?!

[Since they're your apprentices, we decided to have them on to surprise you.]

“Well, mission accomplished! You're killing me *and* my reputation!”

“Waaa? Masta, does Masta hate Cha?”

“No, no! I love you very much, Charlette, but look? The ... there're people watching, see?”

Makes you wonder what they'd do without the cameras there, doesn't it?

Yep, he's trash, plain and simple ...

So jealous, it hurts.

“You've got it all wroooooong! This is a misunderstanding!!”

“You get what you deserve! Master *dara!! Darabuchi!!*”

Fuming, Ai starts railing on me, “I kept quiet because this is your *important work* But all you wanted to do was to get fed by a woman with big boobies!”

“Wait, Ai That was in the script——.”

That very moment.

“What do you think you're doing?! How long are you going to embarrass yourselves in front of the whole world?!”

Lady Ai Yashajin's grand entrance.

With yet another grade school girl on the scene, Ms. Rokuroba hit her with a remarkably relevant question.

“W-Well What are you then?”

“That pervert’s apprentice. Unfortunately”

It didn’t take long at all for the viewers to jump all over that.

The apprentices are multiplying?!

This one’s a different type.

Second wife on the scene!

“Huuuh?! S-Second wife?! How ridiculous!! Watch your mouth, you pieces of trash!!”

A direct response.

How nice of her.

Lick the fiery loli.

“..... Gross.”

Ai Yashajin didn’t back down as the comments piled up, lashing back with disgust.

If a Women’s League player spoke like that during one of these live events, she’d be hit with a backlash so hard that she’d be driven out of town. But Ai doing it seems to strike a rather bizarre chord with the viewers.

That’s a good fiery loli.

I want her to roast me.

Trample me.

Would you spit on me?

I’d give anything to be her horsey.

All sorts of stupid comments start scrolling across the screen.

Just when things were looking beyond our control.

[Excuse me. The match is about to end.]

“Huh!?”

Every single set of eyes in the room zooms in on the monitor showing the board.

“Ah! Right now it looks as though the edge of Shinokubo-*Emperor's* defense is about to collapse! The Meijin is advancing! Will this attack be strong enough to get through?!”

Ms. Rokuroba quickly sums up the situation. Her expertise as an experienced and popular Women's League player and broadcaster is shining through.

But, even she, “The Meijin deploys a Silver deep behind the defender's front lines What?! W-What is he doing?” is left speechless by this unexpected late-game move that silences the whole room.

The Meijin starts deploying even more pieces on the edge of the board to deliver a final blow to Mr. Shinokubo's King like he's trying to pry a stubborn shellfish out from the back of its shell.

“T-This sequence I've never seen anything like it!”

“This is checkmate Right? That should do it”

Mio and Ayano stare at the monitor, blinking in disbelief. Every single one of the comments rolling across the screen now is in awe at the Meijin's late-game might.

However.

“..... Huh?”

Something felt very off.

The Meijin's final push looked like meticulous magic at first glance. All the other pros here didn't seem to think anything was strange.

The only other ones besides myself to notice—were the Ais.

“Huh? That's a weird way to advance, isn't it?”

“..... It is. He’s clearly wasting his turns.”

Ms. Rokuroba’s eyebrows sink.

“What? A weird advance? Who do you think you are, saying things like that? That Pawn advance the Meijin just executed is practically a work of art. Two amateur children couldn’t possibly——.”

“No.”

I cut her off and say.

“Ai. What’s the best possible sequence?”

“Rather than the ♜ 9 One Silver, ♜ 9 Three Silver, ♞ taken with the King, ♜ 7 One Silver, and then the defender moves ♞ 7 One Gold to take that Gold then deploy a Lance for checkmate. On the other hand, if the offensive player goes ♞ 6 Nine Silver, then ♜ taken with the King, ♞ 6 Seven Bishop promotes, ♜ 9 Four Pawn, ♞ taken with the Promoted Bishop, ♜ 8 Five Silver, then I think he would win.”

“He totally would. But the way this is going, he’ll end up two Pawns down and give up that Silver for free. Such a sloppy attack. I’d go so far as to say——.”

Ai Yashajin walks up to the big board where two Pawns are facing each other in the fourth column and taps on them with her tiny fist.

“If he’d just taken the ♜ 4 Six Pawn back on the 107th move, it’d be as clear as day. This defensive formation was all messed up because the edge is on sticking out, see? Humph! Sure looks like the so-called *best Shogi player ever* is showing his age.”

“That’s enough! S-Shut up already!”

Ms. Rokuroba lost her cool, her voice getting more ragged by the second.

“If you’re so smart, then say the shortest path to checkmate, why don’t you! Be specific!”

“ ♠ 4 Six Pawn to take the white Pawn, ♢ 3 Four Rook, ♠ 7 One Bishop promotes, ♢ taken with Gold, ♠ 3 Four Rook, ♢ 5 Six Bishop, ♠ 6 Seven Bishop, ♢ 7 Nine Gold——.”

“S-See there! The defender has the advantage!”

“Huh? The King would take ♠ 7 Nine, then ♢ 6 Seven Bishop promotes, moving ♠ 3 Seven Rook would block everything. You’re in the Women’s League and can’t read that?”

“.....!”

“Even if the defender went with ♢ 5 Six Bishop, ♠ 6 Seven Rook, ♢ taken by Bishop and promotes, ♠ 7 Eight Silver would cut off the attack. Then, after the offensive player’s next turn, deploying a Rook at ♠ 4 One would all but end the match. Clear as day, don’t you think? There was no need to charge in from the side like this. Do you understand?”

Damn lol! Strooooong lololol.

That girl should be doing commentary.

Times are changing in the Women’s League.

“..... Brat”

Hearing Ms. Rokuroba’s quiet retort sends a shiver up my spine.

“Look! The Emperor surrendered!!” Mio yells and everyone turns back to the monitor all at once.

There we are, 99 title seasons!

Hahahahahahaha.

I lol’d.

So now he’s a quadruple titleholder?

Did the papers deploy an army?

The press corps swarms into the arena, so many that all of them couldn't fit. Master Kiyotaki jumps out of his observation seat. There are so many viewer comments scrolling across the screen I can barely see the picture.

News is already starting to spread, I'm sure. The match is already over, but the number of viewers watching the broadcast is still going up. It's like a party in full swing.

—But.

While the highest live viewership in title match history was going on, it was eerily silent in only one place, the broadcast booth Quiet enough to make what was going outside sound fake.

The reason ... is me.

“.....”

Looking at Mr. Shinokubo, blue in the face and staring at the board, his whole body shaking with the humiliation of losing three straight matches and his title It felt like I was seeing my future self.

With the title of Emperor now absorbed into his being, the Meijin is surely setting his sights on the next title On the 100th combined season as a titleholder. Heck, he's already moved into position to challenge for it.

That title is—Ryuo.

“Master”

Ai Hinatsuru had been so angry, but now she looks worried about me. Even Ai Yashajin and Ms. Rokuroba have stopped in the middle of their argument to check on me.

In the middle of it all, “..... Weeh? What's wong, ewewybwody?”

Charlette didn't understand what was going on. She's sitting on my knee, looking around the room and very confused.

“Masta, are you sick? Twired?”

“Haha Yes, I’m a little tired. But I’m not sick. It’s just that——.”

“Masta.”

“Yeah?”

“Cha, want Cha to cast a spwell to make you fweel better?”

“A spell? Like what?”

“Wike”

She’d been sitting quietly on my knee this whole time, but suddenly gets to her feet and leans in close to my ear like she’s going to tell me a secret——.



Smooch≡

Something warm and soft presses against my cheek before I knew it was happening.

“..... Huh?”

Wait Hold up? What?

H-Her *spell* was—

“A kiss?”

“Yea! E-hehe≡,” says Charlette with a nod, her cheeks blushing pink—.

“Reported.”

“Reported.”

“Reported.”

“Reported.”

“Reported.”

“Reported.”

“Reported.”

“Reported.”

“Reported.”

“Reported.”

“Reported.”

The screen is filled with letters spelling out: “Reported.”

That’s when Mio and Ayano start screaming at the top of their lungs from beside the monitor.

“Look at all those viewers! Ten, hundred, thousand T-Three million?!”

“T-That’s astounding!! I’ve never seen so many comments!!”

Viewership skyrocketed after the Grade Schooler Practice Group members barged in, resulting in the most viewers in history witnessing the Meijin claim another title and me get kissed by a six-year-old.

At that very moment—my execution was set in stone as well.

“..... Master?”

“Sorry, sorry, sorrysorrysorrySOOOOOOOOOOORRY!!”

[Everyone, please come back for the next broadcast.]

“I am *never* coming back here!!” I howl at the last cue card.

OLD TRAINING PARTNERS

While a group of elementary schoolers' unexpected appearance on a live broadcast was sending waves around the world—.

“*Sigh* So what if I got through the challenge matches, there's no way to get stronger overnight, is there?”

Keika continued to play Shogi in the classroom for hours ... alone.

Then, when she left her seat to buy something to drink ...

“Kei? Is that you?”

Someone she never expected to see called out to her.

“..... Sen?”

“It's been A long, long time.”

A nostalgic face, one of her training partners from long ago stood before her.

Sen Kouzui, Women's League 3-*kyu*.

Originally from Nara Prefecture, she sharpened her Shogi skills alongside Keika in the Kansai Practice League until two years ago. Sen had relocated to Tokyo as soon as she achieved Women's League 3-*kyu* in hopes of furthering her training. She just turned twenty-seven.

—Twenty-seven years old: the age considered to be a death sentence for women trying to join the Women's League.

Should they not fulfill the requirements within two years, 3-*kyu*-ranking Women's League members return to the Practice League However, only those under the age of twenty-five are allowed to join.

In other words, Sen cannot go back to the Practice League.

There is also a requirement that amateurs joining the Women's League

without passing through the Practice League via Tournaments must be “under twenty-seven years of age.”

Keika knew that Sen had hardly won any matches since becoming Women’s 3-*kyu*.

Sen’s only chance to remain in the Women’s League was to claim victory in the Mynavi Preliminary Matches Should she fail, her path to the League would close forever. Her dream would end right then and there.

Also, Sen surely knew that Keika has a *B* on her Practice League record. It was written all over her face when she spotted her old friend.

Keika, finally managing to force a smile, starts the conversation with the safest topic she could.

“So, Sen What’re you doing here at the association today?”

“I’m working as an assistant for children’s Shogi classes. I know other things should be more important But right now it’s too late to let myself stress out, so here I am.”

“I, um, had Mynavi Challenge Matches yesterday.”

“Yes. I saw the match records Pretty impressive.”

“Ahaha How embarrassing. I can’t exactly say I won the last one”

“Nothing to be ashamed of”

They hadn’t seen each other in two years.

There was so much catching up to do but The words wouldn’t come, no matter how happy they were to reunite.

Time crawled by until Sen shyly waved her hand.

“..... So, I’ll see you at the Preliminaries.”

“Yes. See you there”

How about a match for old time's sake?

Neither one made the offer.

Even now, each one considered the other an irreplaceable friend It was for that very reason they knew the other would become their greatest obstacle.

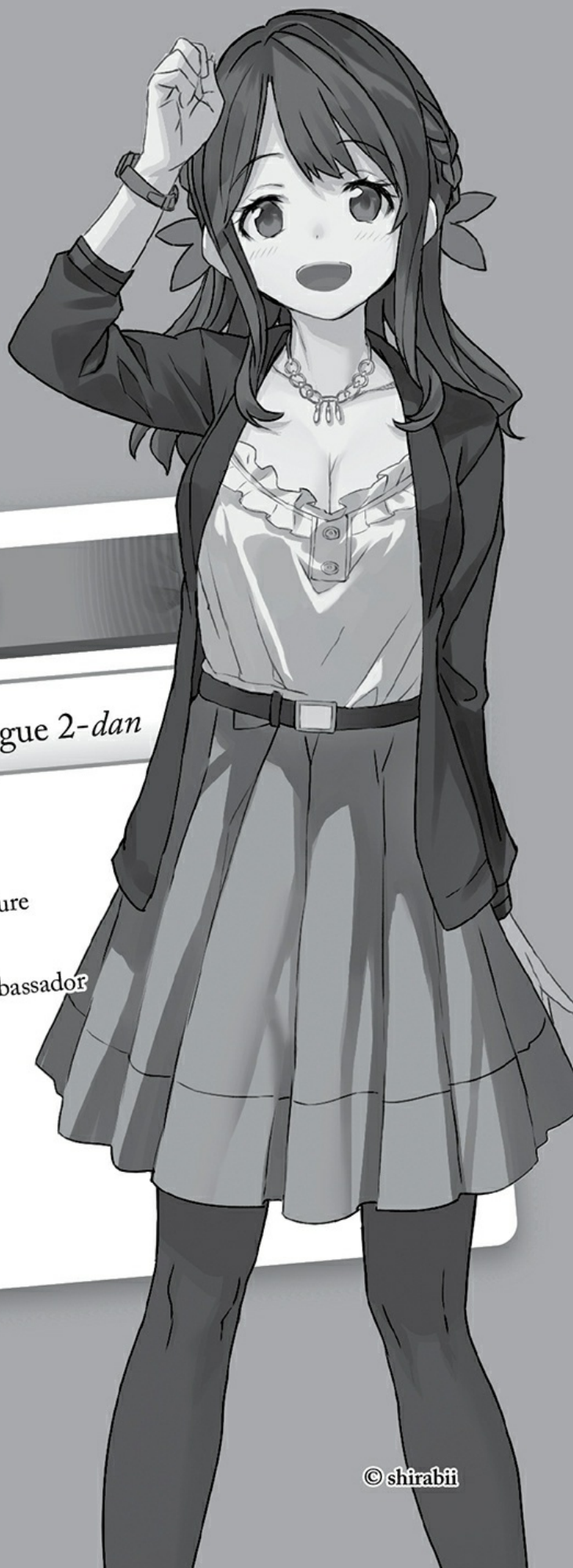
RECORD 3

Ryu

PLAYER INTRODUCTION

Tamayo Rokuroba Women's League 2-dan

- PLAYER NUMBER: 41
- BIRTHDATE: 2/14/1997
- HOMETOWN: Numazu City, Shizuoka Prefecture
- MASTER: Bruno Redmond 9-dan
- OTHER NOTABLE TITLES: Numazu's Shining Ambassador



MORNING IN TOKYO

“Meijin Sweeps Lord Taishi! Seizes *Emperor* Title!”

“100 Combined Title Seasons Within Reach!”

It's the morning after the Emperor Title Match.

Eating breakfast alone in the hotel's dining room, I look at all the newspapers on the shelf and sigh at how much coverage the match got.

“..... Full front-page news on every single one. It's the Meijin, so I should've seen this coming, but Normally papers that don't sponsor title matches just put an article on the last page somewhere”

After yesterday's *Nico Live*——.

I went to Shinagawa Station to see Keika and the rest of the girls off when they were getting on the bullet train. Of course, Ms. Rokuroba's Practice Session offer went up in smoke.

Also, I got interrogated by my apprentice on the bullet train platform.

“Master? What are your plans for tomorrow? Don't hide anything and be very specific.”

Charlette was so tuckered out after a fun day that she'd fallen asleep on my back, so I was carrying her and everyone's souvenirs (that I paid for in full, yeah) in both arms: a hunched over, exhausted mess. When I looked up to answer my apprentice glared back at me with a dark, burning rage that I hadn't seen in a long time.

“Oh, tomorrow? Didn't I tell you? I've got a Practice Session.”

“..... You're not going to do naughty things?”

“No?! What kind of Practice Session would that be?!”

“.....”

Pout. Ai puffed out her cheeks without saying a thing. She didn't believe a word I said

“I-I'm really going to a Practice Session! A very intense, totally serious game of Shogi—.”

“So then, who's your opponent? Please be honest. I know you're playing against a woman, right? It's the one with the big chest, yes?”

“A-Ayumu. It's Ayumu.”

“..... God-sensei?”

Keika, who'd been looking kind of depressed up to that point, suddenly smiled.

“Speaking of Ayumu, I saw he made it all the way to the Ryuo Title Match qualifier. He's really making a name for himself!”

“Yeah But considering who it is, I'm not about to celebrate”

“Ah——”

Keika grasped what I was getting at and let it drop.

Qualifier—basically, the Ryuo League Finals and, in this case, a series of three matches.

Ayumu is already set to take on the best Shogi player.

The *god* of the Shogi world—the Meijin.

“Since his first-ever league match against the Meijin happens to be in the Ryuo League Qualifier, and a series too ... it'll be a great learning experience for him, but having to beat the Meijin twice is”

“B-But you came all the way to Tokyo, Yaichi. Doesn't that mean you want Ayumu to be your challenger?”

"I didn't exactly go out of my way. I mean, my apprentices were in Mynavi anyway, so And yeah, Ayumu being my challenger would have its advantages. The Meijin showing up to my first title defense match could turn into a massacre."

He's strong, that much is obvious.

But the *hype leading up to it* would be just as big of a problem.

"The Meijin will become the Eternal Septuple Title Holder with one season as Ryuo. Even if he doesn't take it, he'll hit the 100 combined title seasons mark anyway"

Media coverage of the next title match will make the last one look like nothing.

It goes without saying that the world will be rooting for the Meijin to win.

"I don't want to have to defend my title against all that, heck no. That's why I'm helping Ayumu, not because I think it'd be fun for the two of us to fight for the title——."

"Oh yeah, right." (grinning) ...

"W-What's that for?"

"Oh, nothing. Can't a sister be happy that her cute younger brother has a friend?"

"..... I'm your older brother apprentice, remember?"

"True. U-he-he♪"

Yeesh Ayumu and I ... circumstances have forced us together over the years. And you know, the enemy of my enemy is my friend, so there's that

"..... There you have it. I have a Practice Session tomorrow. And I'll be coming straight back to Osaka once we're done. Nothing that you're worried about is going to happen, Ai. I promise."

“..... Okay.”

Huh? I still think that was a lot faster than usual.

Usually, her bad mood would go on for days, making extra-spicy food and whatnot She gave the go-ahead so quickly that I’m actually kind of scared and even a little lonely.

The icing on the cake was when she tried to reassure me.

“I’ll keep studying really hard when I get back to Osaka, so please do your best here in Tokyo, Master! There’ll be some delicious curry waiting for you when you get back!!” she said, encouraging me with a smile.

Seeing that energetic, innocent grin made my heart twinge ... hard.

Because I lied about one thing.

“Crap, crap, crap. I’m late”

Riding the Yamanote Line toward my destination, I’m freaking out.

“I’m so late She’s going to be pissed”

I got so caught up in the newspapers and reading articles on the Internet that it was already past the time we promised to meet when I looked at the clock.

I told Ai, “I have Practice Session.” I told her that my opponent is Ayumu. Both of these statements are true.

But there was one thing I didn’t tell her.

If I brought up that *she* was going to be there, Ai probably would’ve insisted on going and stayed here in Tokyo But hey, she’s got a flat chest, so I should be safe. Yeah.

Squeezing my way off an extremely crowded train and through a jam-packed train station, I walk toward the exit.

Now, where? Ah, there she is.

I spot her almost immediately.

A girl with pale white skin wearing a winter sweater over her school uniform in the middle of summer holding a black parasol.

“Hey there, cutie. You’ve got it going on?!”

“That sailor-style school uniform: are you on a field trip with your classmates?”

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but are you from overseas? Do you understand Japanese?”

A bunch of young men are hitting on her, but she doesn’t say a word. Heck, she doesn’t even look at them.

She’s blocking their advances like a wall of solid ice.

Utterly rejected, the men shrug it off like, “Bet a girl like that ignores everyone.”

I walk toward the ice-cold girl in a school uniform and say—, “Sorry! Y-You were waiting a while, weren’t you?”

My voice triggers her first response.

Tilting the parasol, her silver hair swishes from side to side.

“Holy! She’s a bombshell”

“Like a doll or something”

“What’s she doing with that loser?”

Her face out in the open, everyone around her couldn’t help but sigh.

In that moment, a feeling of superiority washed over me But that *loser* comment kind of hurt. Just a little.

“You’re late, idiot,” says Naniwa’s Snow White as she grabs hold of my nose

and gives it a hard twist.

HARAJUKU

The city of youth, Harajuku.

It's surprisingly close to the Shogi Association, only about fifteen minutes away on foot if you really hoof it.

I walk down Harajuku's most recognizable area, Takeshita Street, with Big Sis.

"Come on, Big Sis. Please, lighten up."

"....."

"I admit it's my fault I was late but It wasn't *all* my fault, okay? I had to work ten hours straight yesterday on *Nico Live*, remember? And my apprentice was really upset with me right afterward"

"Work? Hah! What work?" Big Sis spits back.

"All you did was ogle a flirty Women's League player with big boobs. Then you got kissed by a little girl after she barged in You call that working? If it weren't for that pipsqueak, I would've grilled you alive."

"Come again? Big Sis, were you watching *Nico Live* yesterday?"

"No."

"Huh? But——."

"Shut up and move it!"

Big Sis grabs my ear and pulls me into one of the smaller side roads branching out from Takeshita Street.

Now we're on a narrow, dim road called Brahms Lane that's sandwiched between buildings.

"..... It's amazing how much can change just by turning a corner."

It's so quiet back here that all the fanfare out on Takeshita Street feels like some far-off dream. With a bunch of antique shops lining the street, this calm area has a hideaway-home kind of vibe to it.

Enjoying the relaxing atmosphere, we proceed along the stone pavement.

It wasn't hard to spot our destination right away.

"Here."

Big Sis stops in front of me.

In front of her—is a building that looks like it came right out of a Western fairytale, almost like an old church.

There's a plaque with some fancy letters embedded in the thick stone wall.

"Sch, Schne? What does that say? What language is that?"

"Schneewittchen."

"Meaning?"

"..... No idea."

Big Sis collapses her parasol and pushes against the heavy-looking stone and iron door. There's a sign that says *Closed* on it, but she doesn't seem to care. The hinges creak as the door starts to open—.



“How very punctual, Ginko.”

There was a woman sitting on a chair with an extremely high backrest—more like a throne waiting for us inside.

“And you, young Ryuo. I bid you welcome to my castle.”

Eternal Queen Rina Shakando.

The top Women’s League player, she’s held the Women’s *Myouseki*, or Women’s Legend title for nearly twenty years.

By the way, that title was originally going to be *Women’s Meijin*, but it was thought that someone having that awe-inspiring of a title in the league would cause confusion. So they eventually settled on Women’s Legend.

But that isn’t Ms. Shakando’s only title.

She also holds the four Eternals—the title of *Eternal Queen*.

Back when the Women’s League only had four titles, she had them all at once and long enough to earn the *Eternal* designation. That means just what it says: she’ll be known as *Queen* forever.

Ms. Shakando has a combined 51 title seasons.

She’s 6-*dan*, the highest rank in the Women’s League.

Also, she holds the same status as any other pro with the Shogi Association, which means she has a vote as a board member and the right to take apprentices.

Along with holding that influential position, she has run her own boutique in Harajuku for decades now and became a unique player because she has her own fashion brand.

“What say you, young Ryuo? I would love to hear your thoughts on this, your first visit to my castle.”

“Wheew Ayumu told me about it, but what can I say? Words don’t really do it justice

She happens to be my training partner, Ayumu Kannabe’s Master.

Ayumu is the only pro in the Shogi world with a Women’s League member as their Master.

One look at this place is enough to realize how much of an impact that has had not only on his Shogi, but on his fashion sense—and a whole host of other things too. It fits very well.

“This is usually a clothing store, right?”

“Precisely. I sell attire as well as accessories. I have a large space to host fashion shows and I run a small studio for magazine catalog photo shoots. Ginko informed me that you would accompany her, young Ryuo. So, I closed them all for the day. Oh yes——,” Ms. Shakando says with a sideways glance at Big Sis. “That space can also be used for weddings, so please let me know when you have a need for it.”

“Thanks for the offer, but both Big Sis and I are too young to get married

“It’s standard procedure to secure a venue far in advance, young Ryuo.”

“It’s not like we have anyone in mind. Right, Big Sis?”

“..... None.”

Dammmmmn, she sounds pissed.

Yeah, I knew I shouldn’t have been late. She’s going to be in a bad mood all day, I just know it.

“S-So, Ms. Shakando? Where’s Ayumu? There isn’t a second to waste, so I’d like to get our Practice Session started asap.”

It's best to let a pissed Big Sis be. The more space there is between us, the better.

Ms. Shakando points to a nearby stairwell with one of her delicate fingers and says, "God Cauldron awaits you on the second floor however ..."

"However?"

"First, I insist you observe a match between Ginko and myself."

".....! *Sensei*, that's——."

"... perfectly all right. Yes, Ginko?"

The Queen silences Big Sis's objection with a smile.

"Surely, I can't be the only one who occasionally wants to show the young Ryuo what she can do?"

QUEEN

Absolutely everything here is beautiful.

“Whoa

Taking a moment to have a good look around, this whole place is breathtaking.

The interior looks straight out of medieval Europe, and even the table where the Shogi board is has legs carved to look like a cat. Something tells me this woman sleeps in a bed with a canopy.

While I’d definitely say it’s a strange place to play Shogi I bet that for Ms. Shakando, who was born with a bum leg, *tatami* rooms aren’t the easiest places to play because you have to sit on your ankles.

Then again, it all comes down to her *tastes*. They’re exactly the same as her apprentice’s.

What truly stands out among the furnishings are the Shogi pieces.

“Those are unique pieces, aren’t they?”

“They’re *Mita Gyokushi*. Take this Rook for instance. Doesn’t it capture the beauty of an angel unfolding her wings? Gorgeous.”

Ms. Shakando held out a piece for me to see, her face beaming with pride.

“I’ve always been partial to carved pieces. These here are as beautiful as they come.”

Shogi pieces with the individual characters carved into the surface, *horigoma*, are cheaper than the ones pros use for title matches called *moriagegoma*. The characters on those pieces are painted in several layers so that they jump out of the piece itself. Carved pieces may be cheaper, but some people think they’re more beautiful because they require a higher level of skill to make. Rather than

just using paint, carved pieces literally make a lasting impression.

But more than that, they're really easy to read.

That's why a lot of pros like practicing with carved pieces But, I've never seen anyone this devoted to them.

Not just the pieces.

The board, the chairs, the table, the water pitcher, the glasses and even the room itself.

Every single detail reflects their owner's sense of beauty. Maybe that's why it's stuffy in here.

However, far more beautiful than the surroundings—are the two players.

"Shall we?"

"..... When you're ready."

Big Sis almost sounds nervous, lowering her head as Ms. Shakando turns on the chess clock. It looks like Big Sis always goes first for the first match whenever these two have Practice Sessions.

Both open their Bishop Path first. Big Sis then advances the Pawn in front of her Rook and Ms. Shakando closes her side of the Bishop Path before advancing her own Bishop.

—Going for a *yagura* defense, maybe?

As soon as that thought crossed my mind.

"Huh?!" I say in surprise along with Big Sis.

That was because Ms. Shakando, a Static Rook party member, *slid her Rook across the board*.

That formation—a Normal Fourth-File Rook with a closed Bishop Path!

"..... Seriously?" I mumble under my breath in disbelief and check the board

one more time.

Fourth-File Rook? It's really just Fourth-File Rook? Yep, the average, run-of-the-mill Normal Fourth-File Rook.

“.....”

Big Sis's hand stops moving for a moment as she glances up at her opponent's face.

Ms. Shakando is quietly sitting there. That means this was her plan from the start.

“.....”

Big Sis starts guiding her King to the left as if feeling her way across the board. Ms. Shakando didn't try to stop her either, just guided her own King in the same direction.

By all means, make an anaguma—that's what her hands are saying.

This kind of match, Static Rook *anaguma* vs. Fourth-File Rook, used to be played all the time back in the era before I was born. But it almost never turns up nowadays. Why is that?

—Because Static Rook *anaguma* is so much stronger: too strong.

The defensive formation *anaguma* is so powerful that most people think players are ahead just by making one. Static-*ana* tore through the Shogi world like a rampaging sledgehammer, to the point that many members of the Ranging Rook party converted to Static, Ms. Shakando included.

Even still, Ms. Shakando is facing down Big Sis's Static-*ana* with a simple Mino Castle defense alongside a Fourth-File Rook like it's the 1970s.

That's as reckless as racing against a fully tuned sports car with an antique—.

“..... You're sure?”

“About what?”

“.....”

Those were Big Sis’s last words until their match was over.

Static Rook *anaguma* vs. Fourth-File Rook, a blast from the past.

Like clashing armies from the Warring States Era, each ordering their troops into the best possible positions, protecting their King in full view of the enemy Then, the whole army began a slow advance.

Ms. Shakando has changed her Mino Castle into a High Mino Castle, which is pretty much the same as an *anaguma*.

It’s been so long since I’ve seen one, even in a match record. The Eternal Queen is about to take on the latest, most powerful formation with outdated Shogi.

It goes without saying that Big Sis, armed with the most up-to-date info, goes on an all-out offensive. Normally, the Static-*ana* would utterly destroy the other side but——.

Something strange happened as the match progressed.

Big Sis, the one on the attack, looks like she’s hurting.

“.....!?!!!”

She opens her mouth over and over, like a desperate drowning person gasping for breath and twisting her hands in pain.

Meanwhile, Ms. Shakando is perfectly calm. Breathing like normal, she moves her pieces with a quick, smooth touch.

Her elegant, graceful movements are so inspiring that I whisper under my breath, “Reversal Yep.”

Ms. Shakando let Big Sis attack all she wanted because she’s using the pieces Big Sis is losing to naturally reinforce her own formation. There are plenty of

martial arts that do the exact same thing: using their opponent's strength against them—in other words: Reversal.

What's more, it's offense and defense rolled into one.

Compared to Big Sis, whose only option is to *attack*, Ms. Shakando is simultaneously *attacking* and *defending* with each move.

You can almost tell who's going to win with that alone.

"Now then. This has gone on long enough."

The instant that Big Sis's attack ran out of steam——.

Ms. Shakando starts advancing her deep defensive formation straight toward Big Sis's King, destroying everything in its path.

I'm not exactly sure when, but Ms. Shakando has a combined five Golds and Silvers on her front line. Adding a Knight to the formation turned it into a high-powered wrecking ball.

This is almost like watching a massive meteorite come crashing down———pure despair.

Big Sis's *anaguma* was completely outclassed in both strength and numbers and turned into nothing more than a smoldering ruin in a few short minutes.

"..... I'm out of moves."

Big Sis manages to squeeze out her surrender.

It probably hurt just looking at the board halfway through the match. Honestly, I'm impressed she held out this long.

But even still.

To completely flatten Naniwa's Snow White, who's never lost against a Women's League player in an official match, to this degree

Ms. Shakando is really, really good!

“What’s the matter, Ginko? You left quite a few floating pieces out to dry today.”

“.....”

Big Sis’s face turns red so fast it was like a fire ignited inside her cheeks.

Getting taunted like that must’ve hurt. But losing like this

“No matter how solid an *anaguma* may be, one with a floating heart can never take advantage of it. Remember this well,” says Ms. Shakando with a faint grin as she reaches next to the board and picks up her glass of water. After thoroughly enjoying a few gulps, she turns to talk to me. “Young Ryuo.”

“Yes?”

“Do you know why it was that Ginko lost?”

“Well I think the direct cause was on move ninety-seven, when Big Sis deployed a Pawn at 4 Six. If she’d put it down at 4 Seven, then there still might have been——.”

“No.”

“Come again?”

“Ginko lost because she is but a young maiden.”

“..... Are you saying that she hasn’t had an opportunity to study Normal Fourth-File Rook vs. Static-*ana* match records?”

“That reasoning isn’t even the half of it. I manipulated her heart by much simpler means As a result, winning was far easier than I expected. Seems like I owe you a debt of gratitude.”

“???”

“Do you still not understand? What I’m saying is——.”

“Sensei!!”

Big Sis tears into the conversation, speaking up for the first time. Ms. Shakando doesn't look surprised at all. She glances at Big Sis with a hint of amusement in her eyes as she takes another sip of water.

I nervously try to soothe Big Sis, beet red and fuming. This loss has gotten so far under her skin, she might explode.

"Uh, um, Big Sis? I know it's got to hurt, losing that badly to a normal Fourth-File with Static-*ana*, but you don't have to get so angry——."

"SHUT UP! GET LOST!!"

"Going, going"

Y-Yeesh, what's her problem? She's acting like she only lost because I was there, like some kid throwing a temper tantrum.

I hurry to the stairwell, almost like getting chased away by Big Sis's outburst of agony, and head upstairs where Ayumu is waiting.

They're already lining up the pieces for their second match behind me, I can hear it.

PRACTICE SESSION

“ 4 Five Pawn,” Ayumu says out of nowhere the second I step into the room.

My mind makes the switch instantly, visualizing a Shogi board that doesn't exist.

My mental Shogi board.

“ 6 Eight Silver.”

I say back.

The Practice Session underway, both of us are still on our feet.

Ayumu's standing by the window and wearing his usual cape. It matches this room's old European theme to a T.

But, Shogi is all that exists in our minds right now.

“ 9 Five Pawn.”

“ 7 Three Bishop Promotes.”

First comes a *yagura*, Ayumu's specialty.

I doubt that most people would understand our conversation even if they wrote everything down and tracked our moves on an actual board.

Of course, it takes a great deal of Shogi knowledge to do this but it's not like he and I are just naming spaces back and forth.

We're listening for the slightest waver in the other's voice.

Pauses.

Tiny shifts in posture.

And facial expressions.

Our brains are fiercely dissecting all that at once, swapping information in a blur.

It's a bizarre exchange, like we're melding together everything that we have without making any physical contact whatsoever.

“ 4 Six Silver.”

“ 4 Five Pawn.”

“ taken with Silver.”

“ 7 Three Knight.”

The reason I came all the way to Tokyo to have a Practice Session with Ayumu comes down to one thing: neither of us *were satisfied* without meeting face-to-face to swap info. anymore.

Most of the things we should pick up on get cut out when doing Practice Sessions over the Internet.

It's like the way couples feel like something's missing when all they do is call and text each other. Shogi is the same way at the high levels.

“ 3 Five Pawn.”

Next is the Bishop Exchange. Ayumu blasts through my outer defenses like peeling back layers of clothes to get to my core in one swift strike.

“ 6 Five Silver.”

“ 4 Seven Promoted Pawn.”

“ 5 Four Silver.”

“.....?!”

Ayumu falters for the first time after hearing my move.

A slight pause in his thought process which had been keeping pace with mine.

“.....  6 Three Pawn?”

“▲ 6 Eight Gold right.”

“.....!!”

Sway Ayumu loses his balance and grabs the windowsill for support.

“△ 8 Six Pawn.”

I say my next move just as he was about to recover.

“▲ taken with Pawn. △ 8 Seven Pawn. ▲ 5 Three Knight Promotes.”

“△ 8 Six, Rook?”

“▲ 3 Nine Rook.”

“?! Thr- Nine Rook?”

Ayumu gasps, his fingers crawling up his cheeks with his head in his hands.

I speed up my thought process even faster, to the point that saying my moves out loud feels unfair.

There’s a massive tree inside my head.

An endless tree unconfined by my brain, infinite branches reach out in all directions. I slice off one of the big ones. The remaining branches continue to spread, sprouting even more branches to form brand new standards.

After my match against Jin Natagiri 8-dan—I could clearly tell that *I was stronger than before*.

My mental Shogi board became clear and I could see even deeper into deviating sequences than ever before.

—I broke the wall.

That was the first time I had that feeling after turning pro.

It made me realize just how risky my Shogi was. It’s crystal clear to me now.

But, part of me wasn’t sure if this change was my Shogi skill improving. I needed to know for a fact if these sequences I was reading would actually work.

That's why I needed to meet Ayumu like this today: face-to-face.

"..... ♠ 2 Four Pawn."

His breathing steady, Ayumu took his hand away from the windowsill. What's this

"? ♞ taken by Silver?"

" ♞ taken by Pawn."

".....?!"

Now it's my turn to be surprised. He took it with the Pawn, not the Silver

" ♠ 6 Five Silver right. ♞ taken by Silver. ♠ taken by Silver. ♞ 3 Six Pawn. ♠ 4 Five Knight. ♞ taken by Pawn."

"..... ♠ 3 Four Pawn?"

" ♞ taken by Silver."

"?! ♠ 5 Five Bishop!"

" ♞ 6 Two Rook."

"???!!"

What a shocking turn of events! Ayumu just disproved all of my research and hit me with a brand new deeper sequence.

No matter how well two players know each other, there are certain things they won't show each other as long as they're pros.

However, Ayumu just showed me.

We've known each other more than six years, but this is the first time he's let me see this much.

I'm happy, but also kind of sad at the same time.

He and I already know know this will be our last Practice Session.

Revealing something he would never show.

Bearing it all, we delve deeper into each others' minds.

Sharing all that we've researched, all that we've read, melding our knowledge together—.

Then let it all fly.

“..... Haaa Haaa Haaa”

Next thing I knew, both of us are sprawled out on the floor.

Our overworked brains are starved for oxygen. We must've passed out. I'm gasping for breath like I just ran as hard as I could. But I also feel accomplished, like I put in a hard day's work.

Glancing at the clock—five hours have already passed.

“..... Ayumu. You alright?”

“..... In ... deed”

“..... Five hours, huh? Sure was jam-packed”

Could've sworn we started a second ago.

Then again, it also feels like we've been playing for a month.

There's no way we'd have been this efficient, exchanged so much information if we'd used an actual board.

The top pros don't use a board when doing review sessions most of the time. Most do what we just did: say a few words here and there to communicate.

Players moving pieces around during the review sessions after title matches is merely for the fans, but they stop once the reporters disappear.

The brain is so full of information after ten-plus hours of Shogi that the players only need a few keywords to reference certain spots during the match.

If both of them were reading in the same way, they wouldn't even mention spots on the Shogi grid. Saying things like *there* and *that one* are enough.

I've heard that the Meijin can do whole review sessions by just pointing in the air.

"Haha! Messed that up. Maybe it's that, what do you call it, youthful indiscretion?"

"..... I as well ... I have never revealed that much to anyone before."

Both of us are too embarrassed to look each other in the face.

For opponents, there's a certain line that absolutely can't be crossed.

But The two of us, Ayumu and I, just crossed it.

It's awkward, putting it into words but That's proof of our friendship.

—*I want to go against you in the Ryuo Title Match.*

That's why we've been doing these Practice Sessions. We both want to take down the Meijin.

And, if Ayumu becomes the challenger, then we'll meet again as enemies.

My research to defeat him begins tomorrow. It's my duty as Ryuo, and Ayumu understands that.

That's why For the two of us, this will probably be our last Practice Session.

"Time sure flew by I was the challenger last year, and you're going against the Meijin this year."

"I shall slay the God. Then I shall rise to meet you on your throne. Prepare yourself."

"Oh, I can't wait. It'll be a lot easier for me if that's the way things work out."

We share a grin.

Ayumu is sitting on his knees and I straighten my posture with my legs crossed.

“Well? I know that your early game is perfect but When it comes to playing against the Meijin, have you found any promising strategies?”

“The God——.”

Ayumu called the Meijin *God*.

It’s partly an inside joke among young players, and also partly because we revere the man like a deity.

“He doesn’t try to evade the best strategies of his young opponents. That is especially true for those he faces for the first time. It’s safe to say he takes them head-on without fail. That is where my victory lies.”

“..... I agree he does that a lot, but”

Even in yesterday’s match against Mr. Shinokubo, the Meijin defended against his best strategy and won easily.

“Do you think he’d do that in an important match he needs to win to become the Eternal Septuple?”

“He will,” said Ayumu with all certainty. “Because *his victories will cease should he not.*”

“.....?”

“The God has too much on his plate. Not only must he play a large number of matches, he has duties to fulfill to the Shogi world involving event appearances and speaking to the press all of which chips away at his time for Practice Sessions. But one cannot prevail in the modern Shogi world without the latest research. Therefore——.”

“..... He uses league matches in their place?”

“Everyone plays their best trump card when facing the God. The latest and

best research is laid before him like offerings. So long as he doesn't avoid them, that is."

"It sounds pretty efficient when you put it that way, but But nobody can win like that, right? That's the same as putting yourself in a hole in the early game on purpose."

"Agreed. Victory would be an impossible feat for mere humans like us"

..... But, if it's the Meijin.

"The God weathers the storm during the mid-game. Then he unleashes his wrath in the late-game. That's what makes it possible. At least, *until now*."

"Until now?"

"Tell me, what did you make of the final sequence in yesterday's Emperor League Title Match?"

".....!!"

"I believe I bore witness to a monumental event during that match as well. However, once I studied the records myself post-match I derived that that was not a favorable move. The God made an error."

Then, with a heavy heart, Ayumu told why he thought he could win against the Meijin.

"That man—he is a god no longer."

TEA PARTY

“My, my. The two of you have certainly improved in the past few hours.”

Our Practice Session over, Ms. Shakando greets the two of us when we go back downstairs.

“..... Does it look like it?”

“It’s written all over your faces. That’s the thing about men, newfound strength shows up in their faces so much moreso than women Have a seat, Young Ryuo.”

Ms. Shakando motions to the empty seat across from her.

That’s where Big Sis was sitting before, but she’s gone. I don’t think she’d go home before me, but

“God Cauldron will prepare tea. This is the one thing I look forward to. Please, join me.”

“Where’s Big Sis?”

“Dressing.”

What’s that supposed to mean? Oh well, it’s better for me that she’s not here.

“Actually, may I ask you for some advice, Ms. Shakando?”

“Ohh? It’d be my pleasure.”

“I have two young apprentices who are both still in elementary school. But their talent is unbelievable They qualified for the Mynavi Preliminary Matches.”

“I saw their match records. Indeed, they seem very talented.”

“I have a feeling they’ll both become Women’s League members ... and soon.

I wouldn't be surprised if they claim titles. That's how much talent they have. But for me, as their Master I'm not ready for that to happen. I can't do anything for them

Ai Hinatsuru and Ai Yashajin are far better than I thought.

It's especially shocking how fast Ai Hinatsuru is progressing. Not just her technique, but her mentality too. She's been acting so grown-up these past few days I barely even recognize her

That's been sending up red flags.

"So, Ms. Shakando, please tell me What's it like to be the top Women's League player?"

"Women's League players, hmm"

She takes a moment to think and gives me this answer.

"Being a punching bag."

..... Say what?

"Imagine if you will, Women's League players doing instructional matches at an event. The woman is challenged to play with no handicap. Being that many amateurs can hone their skills to be on par with professionals, even I myself lose more often than not."

"....."

"Shogi fans see this and say, *Women's League players are weak.*"

While it's not true for me and my generation, there was a time when a well-defined line between pro and amateur existed. It used to be that an amateur challenging a pro to an even match was an insult. Pros thought the amateur was looking down on them, being overconfident.

Of course, being pros, all they had to do was put that amateur in their place.

But——.

“In this world, women are seen as *weak* just for being women. Win the match, and the opponent will brush you off saying, *I can't take a match against a woman seriously*. Lose the match, and there are people who will give you their address and say, *Come, I'll teach you a thing or two about Shogi*. We get belittled in victory and defeat.”

“..... That's horrible. Something's wrong with those people on a personal level.”

“It cannot be helped. It happens because we're weak.”

“But——!”

“Women's League players are weak. Our skills will never measure up to the professional ranks. However, no That's exactly why our spirits must be strong. Stronger than professionals and stronger than amateurs.”

“.....!”

“The only reason why Women's League players who are weaker than decorated amateurs and professionals can still be called *players* is because the Shogi world needs to expand to appeal to women, to encourage them to play Shogi. Wouldn't quitting Shogi because of being ridiculed be putting the cart before the horse to some degree?”

Ayumu carries a full tea set over to the table and starts setting out cups.

He sets to work, diligently filling the cups in silence. At the same time, there's a strong aura emanating from him. It's his devotion to his Master, Ms. Shakando, his thoughtfulness.

She gazes at her precious apprentice with kind eyes for a moment before looking straight at me and continuing.

“We are punching bags, ridiculed and shamed And yet we want to stand strong, keep getting stronger still and refuse to yield. Even without talent, we refuse to stop treading water. I myself believe that is how Women's League

players ought to be. Even if our skills don't measure up to the professionals, our hearts must be stronger than all of theirs."

The Queen's words were so passionate they were getting seared into my soul.

Women's League players, their world looks so fancy from the outside.

But only people who are stubborn and muddied to the core can remain at the top, a lot like Kansai Shogi players

"..... You're ... very strong. I could never measure up"

"Thank you for your kindness, but the word *strong* is hardly a compliment for women."

"S-Sorry"

"... Though that's no reason to apologize ... heh," Ms. Shakando quietly laughs. "Many things have been said to me because of my gender", patting her limp leg, the Women's Legend says with a hint of loneliness, "the same is true because of my leg. I had no path in life other than to become strong"

"I came to favor this attire to hide the fact that I cannot properly sit on my ankles. This dress is my armor."

Maintaining that posture is a matter of life and death for Shogi players.

Even when a player who had attained the Meijin title pleaded with the association, "Sitting on my ankles is too painful. Please, allow me to use a chair," it still wasn't allowed. That was as good as announcing his retirement.

By wearing a dress long enough to completely hide her legs when she sits down, Ms. Shakando can avoid the problem altogether.

"The only reason such a ruse is tolerated is due to the fact that many in power have agreed that my existence is greatly beneficial to the Shogi world. No, perhaps I should say I *forced* them to agree. I was desperate because, had I failed, I doubt I would have been permitted to continue."

“.....”

“Weakness is what gives people strength. Feeling inferior grants the spirit wings. If, for instance, I had been born a man with two functional legs my Shogi skills would likely be weaker than they are today.” Then, Ms. Shakando adds joking, “But I lost my cute persona along the way. Due to that I have reached this age without a partner.”

The *Eternal Queen* Rina Shakando is a very attractive woman.

She’s on TV every season and shows up in weekly magazines all the time. I’ve heard that at one point she was even more popular than Big Sis is now. The only reason someone like her isn’t married is because she prioritized her position as a Women’s League player, devoting everything she had to Shogi, over a happy home life.

It’s probably that strong-willed devotion that drew Big Sis to Ms. Shakando in the first place. That has to be why she respects her as much as she does. Seriously, that’s a miracle equal to befriending a wild lion

“So, you spend your time with Big Sis because——.”

“Ginko is strong. Of all the women I’ve met over the years, perhaps she is the strongest.”

Big Sis has a 2-*dan* in the Sub League, and she’s only fourteen.

That’s incredibly fast, even for boys.

There’s a very real chance she can reach 4-*dan*——turn pro.

“That’s why seeing her inspires me makes me believe that *if this girl can become the first female professional, then my life wasn’t a waste.*”

“Really? That much?”

“Should Ginko become a professional, there would be an explosion of women looking to follow in her footsteps. With such an open door, more women would join the Sub League, and the second and third female professionals appearing in

the Shogi world would cease being a mere dream. Even if the Women's League itself should disappear as a result, I would not bat an eye."

".....!"

The woman who literally dedicated her life to promoting the Women's League said she wouldn't care if it was gone.

This woman has put that much on the line?

Put all her hopes and dreams on Ginko Sora's talent?

"Well——."

I bring up another name. The name of someone more talented than Big Sis.

"What about Ika Sainokami?"

"....."

The Queen takes a moment to gather her thoughts before finally answering.

"She's a monster."

Mon ster?

"Her talent surpasses Ginko in one respect. When it comes to excelling at Shogi, that talent is the most important to possess."

"Talent? What kind?"

"*Extreme egotism.* That is her talent's true form."

"Her ego?"

"For Shogi *She'll do anything* to claim victory, to improve. She can inflict serious damage on an opponent's heart without remorse as well as sacrifice anything she holds dear without a moment's hesitation."

"Are you saying that's because of her ego? Look at Big Sis. She keeps as much space between herself and everyone else as possible for Shogi——."

"She does so on purpose, yes? The fact that she maintains that distance is

proof that she doesn't want to hurt those close to her. Ginko is such a kind girl

Ms. Shakando says Big Sis's name with affection.

"However, Sainokami is different. That girl never shows a shred of concern for another's heart. That's why she can stomp on her dearest friends without any misgivings. She can trample on an opponent's dignity with a smile on her face and not feel a thing. Other people become her stepping-stones. Therefore, her skill *has no ceiling*."

Narcissists get stronger. She's spot on about that.

Just like how bad people tend to get richer than nice people, it's common sense that someone who only thinks about themselves would get very strong because all their energy is only going to one place.

However, normal people can't do that.

As long as there's a hierarchy of experience and rank, of Masters and apprentices as long as there's friendship and love it's pretty much impossible to ignore what happens to everyone else and only think about yourself because Shogi is a battle between people. When push comes to shove, the fear of destroying relationships makes you pull up on the gas no matter how hard you try.

Which means *someone able to ignore everything outside of Shogi possesses the ultimate talent*

"S-She may get really good at Shogi But that's wrong, as a human being"

"Precisely. That's why I call her a monster."

The Eternal Queen gives a heavy nod.

"Should someone like Sainokami, whose ego has gone beyond what's socially acceptable, stand at the top, the Shogi world will descend into chaos. That is

because the *respect* at the core of Shogi itself will be deemed worthless. Should that happen, Shogi will become nothing more than a simple game and become obsolete overnight.”

Everything she’s said sure sounds convincing.

Pro Shogi players’ social standing is starting to waver because of how far computers have come. If everyone started thinking that *might equals right*, that could spell the end for professionals and Women’s League players alike.

“Women’s League players are weak,” Ms. Shakando repeats what she said at the beginning. “However, no matter how many strong Women’s League players are born into this world, they’re meaningless if they reject their own heart. Even if there is a small talent gap ... no, *because* there is a talent gap the one who stands at the top must make up that deficit with a strong heart.”

Each word comes out stronger than the last. Ayumu, standing next to her, lays his hand on her shoulder.

“I’ve devoted myself to building the Women’s League into what it is today. Even if it disappears altogether, I will never allow a monster like Sainokami to trample my life’s work. However,” Ms. Shakando sighs, “I may be able to keep that monster at bay at present, but there will come a day in the near future when I cannot contain her. I must ensure that Ginko is as strong as possible before that day arrives. Therefore——.”

“Therefore?”

“I plan to claim Ginko’s titles as my own. Women’s League titles amount to nothing more than chains restraining her talent,” she says with a grin before turning toward me with a look of purpose in her eyes. “Or perhaps, I could have you tame the monster for me, young Ryuo. I hear you have apprentices of your own. Why not bring her in alongside them?”

“Th-That’s not funny! Why would I ever——?!”

“Come now. The monster might go along with such a proposal from the Ryuo

..... Yes?”

“..... How much do you know?”

“Hehe I happen to chair the Women’s League, remember?”

She She knows about *that*?!

I stand there, on high alert, with my mouth open for several moments before Ms. Shakando laughs with a soft, “Heh. Sorry. I couldn’t help having a little fun with this cute little one. Please accept my apology Ginko.”

“Huh?”

She’s apologizing to Big Sis, not me? Why?

My mind racing, I follow the Women’s Legend’s line of sight and see Big Sis.

“Hn? Huh? What? Big Sis?”

But it takes me a few seconds to recognize her.



Because———she's wearing a dress.

“..... Die”

Big Sis, dressed in stunningly beautiful clothes, stares right at me as I look over at her and she says, “Die,” while her face turns bright red and her eyes glisten with tears. This is so messed up

Probably, she's so embarrassed she wants to die.

Ribbons and frills everywhere, her skirt is puffy and really short at the same time. That outfit is too cute to be real.

There's no way anyone other than Big Sis could make it work

But, there's no way she would ever wear it in the first place. She's always hated the thought of wearing a skirt, so Why?!

Why is she wearing something this ... cute?!

While I try and fail to come up with words out of sheer shock, Ms. Shakando says, “You see, Ginko and I are bound by a contract.”

“C-Contract?”

“Precisely. I cover all her travel expenses and lodging when she travels to Harajuku. And in return, Ginko models clothes for me like this. I get to sit and enjoy tea after Shogi while gazing at Ginko, adorned in dazzling outfits I look forward to these moments above all else.”

“.....”

Well She's not wrong

“Young Ryuo. A girl has adorned herself just for you. That doesn't happen every day, now does it? Ginko deserves to hear a comment or two, yes? It would be so sad if she did not.”

“Ugh! I, this isn't for Yaichi”

Big Sis is staring at the floor, mumbling something but nothing's registering.

My heart is in my throat.

My whole body is burning up.

"Ah, um Y-You look fantastic. Seriously Very, cute"

"..... Your head on on a pike"

Every bit of her snowy white skin turns red, all the way to the tips of her ears.
Big Sis has Ayumu pull up a chair for her and takes a seat next to me.

She's so close That's all it took for my heart to start jackhammering away at my ribs.

This has never happened before

"God Cauldron. Would you be a dear and serve Ginko some tea?"

"Yes, Master."

"Such a good boy"

Ms. Shakando lovingly gazes at her precious apprentice. Ayumu meets her eyes with something that looks like a bit more than the respect an apprentice has for their Master.

But my head is so full of Big Sis that I couldn't care less.

My eyes keep shifting in her direction.

Truly beautiful things don't let you look away once they have your attention.

"..... Quit staring. P-Perv"

"I I'm not looking"

"..... Idiot"

Ms. Shakando watches us bicker back and forth and eagerly joins the conversation.

"Isn't she just exquisite in that outfit? Oh, yes. My brand is named

Schneewittchen. Do you know the meaning?”

“I was wondering about that actually. What does it mean?”

I remember those strange letters on the building when I first came in.

Big Sis said she didn’t know what they meant though

“It’s German for *Snow White*. You could say that my brand is tailored to be Ginko’s private clothing line Ahh yes! The first moment I laid eyes on her, I thought a true angel had landed in front of me that day *I shall create clothing for this girl. I will build my brand for her.* It came to me in a flash! And just like possessing a pure objective raises people to a higher plane, having a pure model named Ginko garnered my brand much attention and praise Ginko is no less than my angel! She is my muse, my gospel!! Isn’t that so, God Cauldron!”

“Yes, Master. The clothing you create is the epitome of perfection.”

Ms. Shakando looks to the heavens, hugging herself with her hands on her shoulders like she’s in a trance. Ayumu is next to her, looking at his Master like a devoted servant worshiping the very ground she stands on.

Yeah, there’s something strange about these two

“Do you remember the contract between Ginko and myself I mentioned earlier? There is another clause.”

“There’s more?”

Big Sis’s face is turning paler by the second next to me. It’s been a busy day, turning red and blue

“Precisely. Our agreement includes alternating offense and defense during our Practice Sessions, but who can play their best without an incentive? That’s why we agreed that in the event Ginko wins more matches, I will pull strings to arrange Practice Sessions with other professionals and decorated amateurs for her.”

A bold smile grows on the Eternal Queen's face.

“And, should I be victorious——.”

BIG SIS (SO CUTE)

“Ah, Big Sis? You doing okay? Can you walk?”

“..... No.”

“I suppose it can’t be helped, wearing shoes like that Okay, should we go outside holding hands? You’re fine with it, right?”

“.....”

Swish. Big Sis nods her head like a kid.

I reach out and take my *adorned* big sister apprentice’s hand. She must be nervous because her soft skin is shaking and hot.

The contract she signed with Ms. Shakando.

That last clause——.

“I always make sure your face is hidden while modeling for me, but today Ah, yes. Ginko, return to Osaka wearing that outfit. For advertising.”

“Huuuh?!”

“I will have God Cauldron return the school uniform you wore today by mail. Oh yes, yes. I shall prepare an outfit for you as well, Ryuo. That worn—down readymade double-breasted suit would hardly be a match for Ginko.”

“No, don’t mind me!! I’m fine just like this!!”

We practically flew out of Ms. Shakando’s shop on that note, but

Big Sis isn’t used to walking in high heels, and I can’t stand watching her tripping over herself. Those clothes aren’t the easiest to move around in either.

For that reason, I’m holding her hand to keep her on her feet.

“It’ll be all right. Harajuku Station is right around the corner, or we could get a

taxi all the way to Shinagawa to catch the bullet train and we'll be in Osaka before you know it. Okay? Please hang in there until then."

"Okay"

She looks really worried, staring at her feet and squeezing my hand like this.

I don't blame her If she falls and hurts her dominant right hand, she'll never play Shogi at this level again.

You may be thinking, "She could just play with her left," but Shogi performance is directly connected to your fingertips. In the world of professional Shogi, where players can't survive without maintaining peak concentration, anything that feels out of place can be fatal. I'm sure of it.

"All right, we're about to go into the main street. It's really crowded, so please be careful."

"Okay"

Big Sis nods without protest.

The instant we step out onto Takeshita Street—we get swarmed.

"..... What's that?"

"Holy geeze!"

"So cute!"

"Is she a celebrity?"

"This a promotion or something?"

"Too damn cute!"

"She's not Japanese, is she?"

"Beautiful"

This is insane.

What? What's with all the hubbub?

They couldn't be Nah, it's got to be Because Big Sis is too cute?

Is that really all it takes to draw a crowd? This fast?

"Excuse me! May I please take a picture?!"

That voice broke the dam.

"Where did you buy those clothes?!"

"Is she a model?!"

"Please, tell me your name?!"

"Do you have any social media accounts?!"

One voice after another. It's one step short of a riot.

"It-It's for sale in a shop on Brahms Lane called Schn Something or other, but it's there! Oh! They're closed today though, so please go tomorrow! And no, she's not a model, so no pictures please! Also, that's her real hair, not a wig! It's not for sale anywhere!!"

Questions are flooding in. I step in front of Big Sis, shielding her, and try to *world* my way through them at the top of my lungs. As a member of the Static Rook party, being worldly isn't my strong suit but This is no time for joking around?!

The one thing I can't world away are all the people asking for pictures.

Sure, there're too many requests to handle in the first place, but these people are just ignoring me and taking pics at a distance. I can't do anything about all the shutter noises going off.

Even worse, "Excuse me! She's just a normal person, so please stop with the pictures——."

“..... I don’t care.”

“How the hell could you not?! I told my apprentices I was going to Practice Session, but I didn’t say I’d be with you! And this is Harajuku?! If this gets out——.”

“I don’t care!”

Big Sis puffs out her cheeks like an angry little kid and looks the other way. Something must have pissed her off because she’s squeezing the living daylight out of my hand. Owch!

I guess the crowd thought her reaction made her look even cuter because those shutter noises are only getting louder. Sure, I’d like to get a picture of her for myself but Please, put those cameras away, I’m begging you!

“..... Yeesh! Whatever happens, don’t blame me?!”

“.....”

Big Sis puts all her weight on my arm, using me like a cane as the two of us inch our way down the main street.

It took nearly an hour to get to the station only a quarter-mile away. Why are there so many people? This isn't some cosplay photo shoot in Akiharabara, my word

The one silver lining in all of this is that no one seems to recognize Big Sis as the Shogi world’s Naniwa’s Snow White.

Then again, it’s only a matter of time before people start matching up these pictures on the Internet Better be extra careful for a while

“..... What are people going to say once the Association and other players see these pictures? They already have the wrong idea about us, and then Ms. Shakando had to go and make us do *this*? I wish she’d cut it out

“..... Not wrong

“What? Big Sis, did you say something?”

“I said drop dead! Idiot!!”

“Okay then

Here I am doing everything I can to help her out, and she tells me to *die*
What am I to her? A slave or something?

“Anyway, catching a train like this isn’t going to happen. I’ll go get a taxi, so wait right—.”

“I’ll fall if you let go, so no.”

“Say what? You just have to stand.”

“I said I can’t!!”

Big Sis tightens her grip and yells at me like some spoiled brat.

It took another hour to get a taxi after that.

While not as much as in the streets of Harajuku, Big Sis got a lot of attention in Shinagawa as well.

“Yeesh~ Stared at no matter where you go. Girls with pretty faces sure have it rough

“.....”

We finally got a reprieve once we were onboard the bullet train.

Reserved or not, getting a seat in one of the main cars would draw too much of a crowd. So we upgraded to the premium Green Car. And, of course, I’m making sure Ms. Shakando pays for it. We’ve kept up our side of the deal and then some!

Big Sis and I are still holding hands as we settle into the soft seats.

Seriously, it’s impossible to trip sitting in a chair, and back when we were

buying tickets I told her, “*You can let go now, right? You don’t need to keep holding my hand, do you?*” I even loosened my grip to send a message but Big Sis wouldn’t have it, looking the other way and squeezing my hand at the same time. So yeah, we’re still like this.

Her hand in mine, Big Sis mumbles under her breath while looking out the window.

“..... We used to go everywhere holding hands, just like this.”

“Now that you mention it, we sure did”

Old memories come flooding back.

It was only by two weeks, but she joined Master’s Shogi family tree before me. Since I was the younger brother apprentice, and a boy, I felt it was my duty to lead her around.

The two of us were just kids, little kids who only thought about Shogi at that. We weren’t physically strong at all.

Both of us were crybabies and total wimps on our own.

But We could go anywhere, as long as we were together.

Holding hands like this triggered a mysterious fountain of courage. We could take on any strong opponent like this.

We even went straight to a Shogi parlor right in the middle of Kabuki-cho the first time we came to Tokyo and bet all the money we had on a *shinken* match, if I remember right.

But we didn’t just go to Tokyo. We’d ride old trains all around the country to places rumored to have strong Shogi players, clutching our allowances in one hand and holding hands with the other. That was a daily thing during our summer vacations in elementary school.

And while we were on those trains——.

“..... 7 Six Pawn.”

“Huh?”

The moment I heard what Big Sis was saying as she watched the trees go by outside the window It hit me like déjà vu: the past and present overlapping somehow.

——Blind Shogi.

That’s right. We held hands and played blind Shogi in those trains.

I’m so happy Big Sis remembers that too. So happy my heart is giving itself a hug in my chest.

So——.

“8 Four Pawn”

I squeeze her hand and rise to meet her blind Shogi challenge.

“2 Six Pawn.”

“3 Four Pawn.”

It’s like bits and pieces of our childhood are coming back.

More and more with each move, slowly We played Shogi.

..... In the end, Big Sis and I kept holding hands until we went our separate ways at Osaka Station.

Getting off the bullet train at Shin-Osaka Station, the ride to Osaka, our hands were connected to whole time.

Then——at Osaka Station.

“..... Well, Big Sis. See you later”

“.....”

“..... I can’t go home until you let go, you know?”

“..... Not yet”

Her hand shivers a little, but Big Sis doesn't let go.

Then, she says in a quiet voice.

“..... Shogi. It isn't over yet”

“.....”

“..... That's why”

My hand in hers is so hot, it's like it's on fire.

My body is burning up.

For some reason, I can't look away from her trembling lips.

If Ai wasn't living with me, I'm sure we would've held hands all the way to my apartment outside Fukushima Station.

But that didn't happen.

That game of Shogi got cut short—a tie by default.

As to why: I've got an apprentice to attend to And Big Sis finally got the hang of walking in those heels and could make it home on her own.

RECORD 4

PLAYER INTRODUCTION

Rina Shakando

Queen Legend - Queen Thrown - Queen E

PLAYER NUMBER: 7

BIRTHDATE: For an Eternal who lives beyond time, age is of no concern

HOMETOWN: Kamakura City, Kanagawa Prefecture

MASTER: (The late) Sadatoshi Ashigara 9-dan

TITLE HISTORY:

TOTAL TITLE MATCH APPEARANCES:	70
TOTAL TITLES:	51

TITLE MATCH VICTORIES:

COMBINED VICTORIES:	11
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OTHER NOTABLE TITLES:

Honorary Award from the Minister of Education
Kamakura City Citizens Award



AUGUST 1ST

August 1st—the day of the Mynavi Preliminary Matches.

Exactly two weeks after the challenge matches, our group rode the bullet train to Tokyo once again.

But things were different from last time—.

“Yaichi. Open this.”

“Ah, sure.”

Big Sis, sitting next to me, holds out a bottle of water. Her blood pressure is so low that she’s about as strong as tissue paper in the morning. Not only that, she looks five times more ticked off than usual—which is saying something because she always looks angry to me

We’ve got a row of three reversed seats.

From the window, it’s Keika, Big Sis, then me.

The two Ais are sitting in the two-seat row across the aisle.

It’s the same group as last time except that Big Sis has taken Akira’s place. I was sure that Akira would come with us and she seemed raring to go.

But, Akira isn’t here.

I asked Ai Yashajin about her when we met up at Shin-Osaka Station and she simply said, “I left Akira behind.”

I got a message from Akira almost immediately afterward: “Tokyo Banana.” She must want me to pick up some of the cream-filled banana-flavored pastries as a souvenir, so I sent her a basic *you got it!* emoji and left it at that. I’ll buy a box if I remember. I’ll probably forget.

“Here, Big Sis. It’s open.”

“Hnn

Then, in the moment I hand the bottle back to her Big Sis’s smooth, delicate, white hand barely brushes up against mine.

“.....!!”

Both of us jump back on the spot.

Just the tiniest touch. I’m not sure if our hands made contact at all.

But, just that little bit sent a strong jolt all the way to my toes.

“S-Sorry

“It’s okay

Bullet train Big Sis hands It’s just like the other day To be specific, remembering that *Big Sis (too cute)* is making my heart race and it’s not slowing down.

Keika, watching the two of us, says, “..... Did something happen between you two?”

“Huh?! D-Did something Like what? Nothing happened at all, right Big Sis?”

“.....”

Big Sis didn’t answer, just gulped down water. She must have been thirsty because that water is disappearing pretty quick. Practically chugging it.

“Is that so?”

Keika gives me a suspicious glance but doesn’t press any further. Then she looks back down at the book of Shogi standards in her hands. Her match only a few hours away, she’s probably more focused on that.

But I’m not out of the woods yet.

“.....”

Slowly, very slowly, I look across the aisle.

Ai Yashajin is in the aisle seat and has an eye mask on. Looks like she's asleep.

Ai Hinatsuru is by the window Several sheets of paper are spread out over her tray table. She keeps writing things down and erasing them over and over again.

She's concentrating really hard. I don't think she noticed what just happened over here.

Normally, Ai's insanely sharp, prodigy-level awareness would have detected that *something* happened between me and Big Sis and she'd be over here investigating by now

Now that I think about it, Ai has never let me sit next to Big Sis before. She would have insisted on me being next to her in the two-seat row or she'd be sitting right between the two of us here in the three-seat row to break us apart Either way, she would have wanted to sit by me.

But she came up to me earlier today and asked, point-blank, "May I sit next to Ai today?" I know it's because she wants to concentrate on her matches, but still

She taps Ai Yashajin's arm to wake her up but doesn't realize I'm looking right at her.

"Ai, would you have a look?"

"....."

Despite being woken up, Ai Yashajin doesn't look irritated at all as she removes her eye mask and glances down to read what Ai Hinatsuru had written on those papers. "..... Looks fine to me," she says.

Are they going over strategies for today?

Because if they are, they could just ask their Master for advice

It's not like I don't understand them wanting to win on their own steam. I think that's wonderful. I've got the Ryuo Title Match to prepare for, so I won't be able to spend as much time with them as I have Their desire to be independent should be great news.

I should be welcoming it with open arms But I feel left out somehow.

Once we're off the bullet train at Tokyo station, the sun is already bearing down on us.

"Looks like it's going to be a scorcher today Much hotter than it was two weeks ago"

"You're complaining because ...? It's an indoor arena, so it doesn't matter."

Big Sis completely destroys my thoughtful observation.

"Um Big Sis? Please work with me during the commentary today, okay?"

"That's the plan. I'm practicing right now."

"....."

Last time I just showed up and got roped into doing a guest spot, but I was formally invited to do commentary this time.

Unlike the challenge matches, the preliminary matches are open to the public and have a live audience.

While Women's League players are all battling it out in the arena, pros and other Women's League members provide analysis and commentary in the large venue hall nearby.

The Mynavi Preliminaries have come to be known as the Women's Shogi Festival because of all the fanfare ... and today's the day.

Since the extremely popular commentator Ms. Rokuroba is participating in the tournament itself, the organizers decided to go for the ace up their sleeve

and ask for the Queen titleholder to take her place——Big Sis.

Big Sis normally wouldn't even think about accepting this gig, so it must be a sense of duty as titleholder that brought her to Tokyo like this.

"Everyone: win today no matter what! Fight hard!!" Ai says with gusto to Keika and Ai Yashajin, looking back over her shoulder after coming off the bullet train. It's still early morning, but she's eager to get started.

The bandanna with the word *Victory* sewn into it that she had tied around her forehead by the time we got to the bottom of the stairs was all the proof I needed. Maybe she's psyching herself up, but she looks like a cute grade schooler about to run a relay on Sports Day. My heart's all soft and fluffy from the adorableness.

Also, Ai's got a huge backpack strapped to her shoulders, much bigger than the one she had last time.

"So What's in there?" Ai Yashajin asks, the backpack thumping against her as she walks.

"E-he-he, my secret weapon♪ Oh! I almost forgot! Ai, Keika: I made bandannas for you too, so I'll give them to you now! Everyone in the practice group signed them!"

"Th ... thank you, Ai. So, I should put this on somewhere when I play?"

"..... What am I supposed to do with this thing?"

Keika smiles to be nice, but Ai Yashajin takes a bandanna like it's some piece of unwanted baggage. Sure, she's complaining, but kind Lady Ai accepts it anyway.

While all that was going on, we got on the subway at Tokyo station and entered the Palace Side Building just like two weeks ago but——.

"Wha? There weren't this many people here last time."

Just as Ai Hinatsuru's startled voice said this from the front of the group, the

building that had been so empty during the challenge matches was now overflowing with people.

“Since the preliminary matches are open to the public, around two hundred fans come to watch every year but What’s going on?! There’s got to be five hundred people here?!”

“P-Perhaps they’re Ginko’s fans?”

Keika has a point. Big Sis is probably part of it.

However—there’s something else drawing in the fans just as much, possibly even more than her.

“It’s them!”

—*Chatter!!*

The Shogi fans who recognize us swarm in en masse, all speaking at the same time.

“Those two”

“Tiny”

“S-So adorable!!”

Their eyes are all pointing in the same direction—at Ai and Ai.

But not everyone was talking about them.

“Kuzuryuo, that piece of trash Having two grade schoolers that cute all to himself”

“One of them is a live-in apprentice too”

“Oh, he’s made moves for sure”

“Got kissed by that golden loli”

“He went too far, taking Snow White. And now this”

“Someone just eliminate that pervert already”

My apprentices' popularity has reached dangerous levels, dangerous for me.

"E-Everyone! Let's hurry on inside! Move, move!!"

Surprised at all the attention, my apprentices are just standing there in front of the crowd. I push them forward from behind and usher Ai and Ai into the arena lobby.

But an even bigger shock was waiting for me.

"T-That's?!"

What caught my eye—was the customary Mynavi Preliminary Match *Private Sponsor* board.

Visitors who pay extra money to become sponsors get to sit closer to the boards and also take pictures with participants of their choice after the matches are over. Only Mynavi has this unique system.

The Basic Sponsor level is \$100.

The Special Sponsor level is \$150.

By the way, Tamayo Rokuroba Women's 2-*dan* was last year's *most sponsored player* with nineteen (four Special Sponsors and fifteen Basic Sponsors). Nothing to sneeze at, sure, but—.

My apprentices got more.

Ai Hinatsuru 199 (Special Sponsors 117 - Basic Sponsors 82)

Ai Yashajin 201 (Special Sponsors 141 - Basic Sponsors 60)

"That's gotta be a mistake!!"

The words blast out of my throat. Why're two kids this popular!!?

"..... What? Is that a lot?"

“Master? There’s lots of stickers next to my name. What do they mean?”

Ai and Ai don’t understand how the system works. They’re staring at the board, heads tilted in confusion, but the highest number of sponsors anyone gets in any given year caps out at thirty. Three digits is unheard of. That figure may as well be from a different dimension.

“Well, um T-These are called Private Sponsors.”

How am I supposed to explain it to them?

Knowing how many eyes are watching during their public tournament debut would surely put even more pressure on their shoulders

Also, players get prize money for matches where Private Sponsors are involved, like this one. The more sponsors they have, the bigger the prize. Sumo wrestling has the same system. And with numbers like these, they’ll get one heck of a prize if they win. About as much as pros make

While I’m busy trying to deal with the shock, Keika comes over to whisper in my ear.

“Think about it, their challenge match records and They were on *Nico Live* too, remember? That’d be enough of a spark for fans.”

“Ah, that makes sense”

“Master? What’s a Private Sponsor?” Ai Hinatsuru asks as she tugs at my sleeve. Cute.

“..... Rubbing it in our faces.”

“He’s all in. The Ryuo’s gone all in.”

“Loli King”

Owch! All the piercing stares and sharp whispers hurt like hell!!

“P-Private Sponsors are, well, basically——.”

“Sponsors don’t give you extra Shogi pieces during your matches, nor do they

affect the outcome. Forget them.”

Big Sis steps in to answer for me but doesn’t stop there.

“Participants have their own waiting room, so get going, Yaichi, to the commentator’s hall ... now.”

“Huh?! Already?! I haven’t given any masterly words of advice and we haven’t taken any pictures yet——.”

“Shut up and move.”

Big Sis yanks my ear, pulling me all the way to the other side of the lobby. Owwwch!

“D-Do your beeeeeest!” I yell some words of encouragement to my apprentices fading into the distance.

There weren’t any chairs in the commentator’s hall when we got there.

“It’s because the Ryuo and Queen are hosting. We’re expecting more people than the usual yearly turnout, so we made this event standing room only,” a particularly excited staff member explains.

“I have to tell you, Kuzuryu-*sensei*, you’re an absolute godsend! Thank you so much for raising those two cute apprentices! They’re nothing less than the future of the Women’s League!!”

“It-It’s nothing Hahaha.”

I’m public enemy number one for many Shogi fans because of it.

“And by agreeing to do commentary, Sora-*Queen* accepted our offer——.”

“Come again? How do you mean?”

“Huh? Sora-*Queen* said she’d only agree to this if you were with her.”

“I did not,” Big Sis says in a murderous tone with a glare that could kill.

“I did not say that Right?”

“Ah! N-No! It was a misunderstanding on my part, please forgive meeeee!!”

The staff member bows to Big Sis over and over again, his head a blur.

Then, “P-Please wait in the break room until it’s time to begin!!” With that, he left like he was running for his life.

“Um Big Sis? What was that about——?”

“I said that you’d be acceptable as a commentator because your apprentices are part of the tournament anyway. I’m only here because it’s my duty as a titleholder. Am I missing something?”

“No, nothing.”

“..... Well, thinking of this job as a present from your elder sister apprentice, would be all right”

“Present?”

“Come on, Yaichi. Today’s”

“Ahh Yeah. That’s true.”

Yes, today is a special day for me.

One that only comes around once a year—a day that I can receive presents.

“Then again, you’ve already gotten better presents from your cute apprentices anyway, right?”

“They haven’t given me anything because I never brought it up.”

“So, they don’t know?”

“I wanted them to focus on their matches. I can’t do anything to help, so the least I can do is not be a distraction.”

“..... They’re that important to you?”

“Important might not be the right word. Responsibility, maybe? Of course, my apprentices are important but——.”

Organizing my thoughts out loud, I say what's on my mind.

“The Ryuo Title Match Qualifiers start in two weeks, and I'll need to prepare for the challenger right after that. Once the Ryuo Title Match starts before the end of the year, I won't have any time to spend with my apprentices. That's why I want to do what I can for them right now at the very least I want them to grow ... grow enough that they can get stronger on their own.”

I want them to get the kind of *strength* Ms. Shakando was talking about as soon as possible.

And I want them to know how it feels. I want them to know what it is to be a Women's League player here at the preliminaries.

“Sorry for droning on like that. But could you keep this between us and not mention it to the Ais? I'd also appreciate it if you didn't bring it up during the commentary today.”

“Wasn't planning to from the start.”

“I, uh, I see”

“But what a lonely guy you are. Working on a day like today and no one to celebrate with.”

“Ugh!”

“Still, think how lonely you'd be if you didn't have work to do. It's not like you had anything else to do today, right?”

“Urgh!!”

“Be grateful. I'm spending my time with a lonely guy on his special day.”

Big Sis gleefully enjoys tormenting me from the bottom of her heart. Even that smile on her lips is sparkling.

THE WAITING ROOM

While Yaichi and Ginko were goofing around in the commentary break room a bizarre air had descended upon the participant's waiting room.

It seemed friendly enough on the surface. Women's League players were shooting the breeze with people they knew, so much so it was hard to believe their matches were about to begin.

..... However, look a little closer, and it would be possible to recognize that the players were avoiding eye contact with their soon-to-be opponents, as well as anyone they may have to face. All were very much aware of the impending battle but pretended to be oblivious, turning the atmosphere into an unlit powder keg.

Inside that room, the two amateurs making their first appearance, Ai Hinatsuru and Ai Yashajin, stood out from the crowd. They received inquisitive glances from time to time, but——.

"It's so nice to see you again. How've you been?"

One Women's League player approached them from out of the blue.

Tamayo Rokuroba Women's League 2-*dan*.

"Well, aren't you two the girls of the hour? I was worried you might be getting anxious, what with all this attention. But you don't have to be."

With the refined grace of an experienced idol, Tamayo smiled at them and offered kind words.

"All of the spectators here to watch you today aren't the least bit interested in how you play Shogi, so no pressure."

Still smiling, she continued.

"Because, think about it. If they wanted to see a good Shogi match, they

would watch two Women's League players play against each other. So, the people who paid all that money to sit closer to your boards don't care what happens. They just want to see two cute little girls try their best. It doesn't matter if you lose, or even if you make too many mistakes to count. See?"

"....."

Ai and Ai quietly listened to what the Women's League 2-*dan*, a person far outranking them, had to say.

Their reaction satisfied Tamayo Rokuroba.

(They're scared stiff. Just two brats after all)

Her intention was to intimidate the two girls rather than poke fun at them.

(The dark brat is in my block. I might have to go against her in the last round Better set the tone while I've got the chance.)

Naïve amateurs can become a major problem if they don't get put in their place.

Therefore, sowing a few negative thoughts in a preemptive strike before the match begins is an effective off-the-board strategy.

Of course, wanting revenge after being ridiculed by Ai Yashajin on *Nico Live* two weeks prior most certainly motivated her actions——.

However, Tamayo realized her plan had failed when she heard Ai Yashajin's next words.

"Who ... are you?"

".....!!"

This was no off-the-board counterattack. Ai Yashajin had honestly forgotten who she was.

"A-Ai It's me. The one who did commentary with your Master on *Nico Live*"

“Ohh, that Women’s League player. The one with no late game.”

“D-Don’t say things like that, Ai You’re being rude to one of the Women’s League *Senseis*,” said Ai Hinatsuru, gently tugging at Ai Yashajin’s sleeve with her eyes focused upward on Tamayo.

“You can show her how it’s done on the board later. Okay?”

“.....?!”

—*Jolt!*

A cold chill raced down Tamayo Rokuroba’s spine.

That’s when she noticed. The elementary school girl looking at her with big, round eyes had yet to blink even once.

Not only that, those big eyes had been trained on her like a suspicious spotlight from the moment she came into the room Only her.

All people who play Shogi have a *blacklist* in their hearts.

Opponents who humiliated them in a loss.

Opponents whose style and personality clashed with their own.

Opponents who, for whatever reason, rubbed them the wrong way.

Names on the blacklist are written in blood and become deeply carved into their very being. Anyone who takes Shogi seriously has that list. New names naturally get added to the list as long as they keep fighting.

A simple victory is never enough to satisfy someone when playing against an opponent on their blacklist. They set out to shatter their opponent’s spirit and trample their dignity But even if they should succeed, that name will never come off the blacklist. That only happens when one or the other passes away.

Tamayo knew without a shadow of a doubt.

Her name was on Ai Hinatsuru's blacklist.

(F-Forget the dark brat—this one is so much more trouble!)

Having never experienced such blatant, pure hostility from a little girl before, Tamayo was unsure how to handle it.

(Why What did I do to make her hate me this much?!)

The thought that her teasing Yaichi on *Nico Live* was, for Ai, an unforgivable offense punishable by death didn't even cross her mind.

Oblivious to Tamayo Rokuroba's quandary, "You're right. There's a chance we'll meet in the last round if things work out that way, so I'll teach you then. Teach you how much talent you don't have."

Ai Yashajin agreed with Ai Hinatsuru's suggestion before she continued with a *but*.

"But ... since a Women's League *Sensei* was gracious enough to give me advice, I'll give some in return."

Flipping her hair over her shoulder like a long, black wing, Ai Yashajin said with a smile, "The two of us are the youngest to ever participate in the Mynavi Preliminary Matches ... which means that we're much more talented than you. So there's no shame in losing to a little girl. Don't get down on yourself."

"..... Brat."

A new name was carved into Tamayo Rokuroba's blacklist.

That name was—Ai Yashajin.

Meanwhile, while two grade schoolers and a Women's League player were throwing verbal punches in the middle of the waiting room

"....."

Keika was in the corner, ringing out her handkerchief with trembling hands. No matter how much sweat she wiped off, her skin wouldn't dry.

One Women's League player walked up to her.

"Kei."

"..... Sen."

This was the same person she happened to meet at the Shogi Association in Tokyo two weeks ago, her old training partner—Sen Kouzui Women's League 3-*kyu*. Keika, who'd been stiff as a statue due to nerves, relaxed enough to greet her with a faint smile.

Sen, watching the two grade school girls a short distance away, said, "I looked at their challenge match records. There are some real strong kids in Kansai now"

"Those two are in a league of their own and making my life difficult."

"Ahaha. Strong kids keep coming out of the woodwork. Must be tough over there."

"..... Sure is."

"....."

"....."

There was so much they wanted to say, both had been looking forward to seeing each other at this very spot, but the words wouldn't come out.

Sen knew that Keika had a *B* on her Practice League record.

Keika knew that Sen was in the midst of a long losing streak in the Women's League.

Both knew one more thing.

Keika and Sen were assigned to the same block for today's preliminary matches. Should both progress through the first round, they would collide in

the last.

After a long silence too thick for words, it was Sen who spoke up.

“..... Back when I got Women’s League 3-*kyu*, when I decided to transfer to Kanto everyone in the Practice League sang a song for me. Do you remember?”

“Of course.”

“That song I listened to it every day when I got to Tokyo. It was thanks to that sendoff that I’ve kept going for two years Kept going without breaking down”

With that, Sen started humming one phrase of the song just above a whisper. Keika joined in right away. The muscles in her tense face eased just enough to bring her smile back.

Bridge of Glory.

It was a song from when Keika and Sen were in junior high school.

The younger members of the Practice League berated it, saying, “Who would know such an old song?” and the like. All eventually gave in to Keika’s strong request and practiced it to sing together on Sen’s last day.

Overcome with emotion, Sen had collapsed in tears with a bouquet of flowers in her hands. Keika bawled right along with her. The younger members saw them crying their hearts out and couldn’t help but get caught up in the moment and cry too. It was a long day.

The song tells the story of a young person working hard to achieve their dreams.

Tears flowing. Many sleepless nights.

“I’m not done dreaming,” Sen said once the song was over. “It’s an absurd dream, I know. These past two years have taught me that much and then some I’ve thought about quitting Shogi altogether so many times after losses I’ve

lost count, but I couldn't go through with it. That's why I'm here."

"..... It's the same for me," Keika replied, slowly spreading out her wrinkled handkerchief as she spoke.

Her skin, which had been soaked with sweat, was now bone dry.

"I saw something for the first time when I realized my dream could be coming to an end. A window And I refuse to let it close."

"Kei"

Keika's unwavering determination caught Sen off guard.

"Well See you in the last round."

"Yes. The last round."

Sen Kouzui and Keika Kiyotaki swore to meet across the board from each other.

Both of them knew.

Knew that—should they both keep their word—the other's dream would be broken.

THE PRELIMINARY MATCHES

“Welcome one and all. Thank you for your patience.”

An announcer’s voice echoes through the arena.

“The 11th Mynavi Women’s Open Preliminary Matches are about to begin. It is now time for participants to make their entrance. Please greet them with a warm round of applause!”

Clap, clap, clap, clap—!!

The arena doors open to a wall of sound as the participants come through, walking in front of the fans and looking very nervous.

—I watch it all happen on a big screen while standing on stage in the commentator’s room along with Big Sis.

“At last, the participants have arrived!”

“Yes.”

“I’ve got to say, we’ve got quite an audience here in the commentator’s hall, but there are even more people watching in the arena!”

“Yes.”

“..... Um, Big Sis? Would you please take this a little more seriously?”

“I am. Problem?”

Boom! The audience explodes with laughter and applause.

Come on Laughing that hard for a simple one-liner comeback? That shouldn’t fly The audience is being way too nice to her, and it’ll go to her head

My shoulders sink, but I happen to catch a glimpse of my first apprentice as she walks across the screen and my eyes start tearing up.

“A-Ai! Y-You’ve grown up so much!!”

“..... Kuzuryu-*sensei*? Are you crying in the middle of our commentary? Would you please take this more seriously?”

“B-B-But, Ai! She didn’t know anything about the Shogi world or the Women’s League, but now there she is in the Mynavi Preliminaries!”

Who *wouldn’t* cry at a time like this?!

Ai, handkerchief clutched in her hand and big backpack over her shoulders, can’t hide her nerves as she walks toward her board. All the while a huge number of fans are showering her with applause.

But my second apprentice gets even more attention as she lightly steps toward the center of the arena empty-handed. But Ai Yashajin must already be zoned in on the match because her eyes are so sharp I wouldn’t be surprised if they cut through the screen like a blade.

Keika’s there. Ms. Rokuroba and Ms. Kouzui who used to be registered in Kansai walk into the picture too. I know pretty much everyone out there for the first round.

Ai Hinatsuru’s opponent is Asahi Hatatachi Women’s League 1-*kyu*. Currently a student at the University of Tokyo, she’s a bookworm who started playing in high school and got the Shogi world’s attention with her rapid ascent and astounding intellect.

Ms. Hatatachi arrives at the board first. Ai goes up to her and asks, “E-Excuse me! May I sit on my ankles on top of the chair?!”

“Huh? Oh, sure. Go right ahead.”

“Thank you so much!”

She lowers her head in a quick bow before taking a big cushion in the shape of a cat’s face out of her backpack.

Big Sis says in a cold voice, “..... Kuzuryu-*sensei*? That thing your apprentice

has there. What is it?”

“It-it’s her kitty cushion The one she uses at home. It’s Ai’s favorite”

That got a big laugh out of the audience in the commentator’s hall.

Ai puts the cushion down on the chair seat and puffs it up with a few whacks.

Then she takes off her tiny shoes and with a cute little *umph* pulls herself up onto the chair and sits on her ankles.

“T-That’s the cutest thing I’ve ever seen”!

“There’s got to be a law against being that adorable”

“Cuteness overload”

All the people who were laughing a moment ago instantly fall for my cute apprentice. Great news!

On the other hand, Big Sis’s mood keeps getting worse and worse. Horrible news!

“..... Kuzuryu-sensei? Is your apprentice fooling around? Just what have you been teaching her?”

“No! Th-that’s um Ah! It’s her secret weapon!”

“Huh?”

“I think Ai had a hard time in the challenge matches because she was sitting on a chair to play Shogi for the first time. Reaching the corners of the board might’ve been hard for her, as well as trying to concentrate in a new position”

That’s probably how she came up with the idea to sit on her ankles on top of the chair.

“Also! Not only does using her favorite cushion add height, she can relax just as if she were playing at home Two birds with one stone! Genius, don’t you think?”

“.....”

Ai takes a bottle of water and her favorite cup out of her backpack and lines them up on the table while I am speaking. It's like she's playing house.

And lastly, she gently places a paper fan down in front of the board.

That's—the one I gave her that says *courage* in my handwriting.

“.....!”

A huge swell of emotion clamps down on my heart, hard.

I'll do anything I can to help this girl. I've never been so sure of anything in my life.

Unfortunately—players are on their own once they sit down at a Shogi board.

No one can lend a hand. Players must fight on their own. For now, and forever.

“Piece flip.”

The match recorder lays a white cloth down over the board and the higher-ranking player drops five Pawns down onto it.

Three of them land upside down. Ai has the first move.

With the matches just about to start, the air around all the boards is thick with tension.

Ai Yashajin flicks her long black hair over her shoulder like a black bird spreading a wing.

Keika is looking at the ceiling with her eyes closed, psyching herself up. Her lips are moving a bit too. She might be going over the sequence she prepared one last time.

“The time has come. Please start your matches.”

With that voice, “When you’re ready!!”

The voices of all sixteen preliminary match participants ring out at once.

..... At least, I thought so.

“Wow, one look out into the arena really says a lot. How can I put it? Each player’s level of popularity is on display. So many Private Sponsors and Shogi fans have gathered to watch the tournament, but some matches are being completely ignored.”

“It’s like when idol groups do a meet and greet.”

“Well, Ms. Rokuroba pretty much is an idol at this point. A few of her fans are on the screen now I don’t mean to brag, but my apprentices seem to be the most popular this year!”

“Being young, unmarried and having a half-decent face is enough to draw a crowd. Shogi skill has nothing to do with it.”

“Oh, ho! You’ll see soon enough! Both of my apprentices are extremely good——.”

“Wait.”

Big Sis, her eyes on the screen showing the arena, cuts me off in surprise.

“Uh, Yaichi. Aren’t we one person short?”

“Now that you mention it Yes, one match hasn’t started yet. Huh? Is someone late?”

Whispers spread through the crowd.

“Well, waiting time is deducted in a 3-to-1 ratio should someone be late for their match. Since this tournament allows thirty minutes of waiting time, ten minutes is all they have. Any more than that, and they’ll forfeit.”

I explain the rules to the audience and scan the tournament match ups at the same time.

The one running late is—Ika Sainokami.

“..... The Empress is late.”

“Forfeiting, that’s too much like Sparky.”

“Think she overslept?”

There’s a real *knowing her* vibe coming from the crowd.

The staff is freaking out, but I’m kind of relieved.

I really didn’t want to see her to begin with, and if she were to clear the first round, her opponent in the last would be—.

“Ohh? I’m right here~.”

I didn’t believe my ears.

I glance in the direction the voice came from—it’s her. In the crowd, someone who shouldn’t be there.

“I Ika?! What do you think you’re doing?!”

“Heard you were doing commentary, Yaichi, and I thought I’d drop by to say hello.”

“Get to your match! You’re in the tournament!!”

The Empress’s unexpected entrance stuns the entire crowd.

Any one of them probably would’ve recognized her right away on any given day, so the only reason she went unnoticed is because no one would’ve ever thought a participant would show up in the commentator’s hall.

“But going in there means I can’t see you, Yaichi. So, I thought I’d get *that* answer before my match starts.”

“That answer? What are you talking about?”

That wasn’t me, but Big Sis who responded. She spit out every single word.

“I wasn’t asking you, pasty hag. Talentless weaklings should keep their mouths shut.”

“.....”

“Oopsie. Did I touch a nerve, Ginko? Take a joke.”

Grin The corners of her lips curling, Ika says, “Meh, it’s all good. I’ll just finish my match first. Get your answer ready≡.”

“The matches started five minutes ago. Your waiting time is almost gone.”

“Just leveling the playing field♪ Ah, yes yes.”

“Yeah?”

“Tell that cute little apprentice of yours. *I can’t wait to have at it the last round* Would you please?”

With that, Ika spins on her heel, parts the crowd saying, “‘Xcuse me, coming through!” and disappears toward the arena.

“.....”

Everyone stands and stares at Ika’s shrinking figure as though they’d been struck by lightning.

Everyone that is except for one: Big Sis whose eyes are frozen square onto me.

—————*Spill every single thing once we’re done. Every last bit.*

GAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!

“It-it looks like the Empress made it in time after all! Now then, let’s get back to the matches, shall we? Oh, what’s this? One match has really heated up.”

“..... Shameless.”

(Ignoring that): “The match between amateur Hinatsuru and Hatatachi Women’s 1-kyu’s really intense! Both sides are snapping back and forth!”

That's the only way to describe it. Neither is using any waiting time, making moves at a furious pace. *Snap, snap, snap!* It's a battle of wills.

That's especially true for Ai, already completely zoned into the board like that.

I could tell right away because, "———Here!!"

Snap!!

She takes a swipe at empty air next to the board whenever she puts a piece down.

"..... Just what is that girl doing?"

"Beats me ..."

Some people in the crowd tilt their heads, confused. But I know. I knew the first time I saw her do it.

The chess clock.

Even though there's a match recorder keeping track of time right now, Ai keeps trying to hit a chess clock that doesn't exist. That's why she keeps swiping at the side of the board.

Players have to keep track of the time on their own in the Practice League. Forgetting to press the chess clock after your turn makes your waiting time go down the drain, so they all get in the habit of pressing the clock really quickly.

Ai's force of habit coming out now ... proves she's concentrating as hard as she can.

"This match is moving along very quickly. Let's review it on the big board."

On my cue, the image projected on the screen changes to a massive Shogi board.

Starting at the beginning, we go through and analyze every move that's been made in there so far——.

Now back to the current move, Big Sis and I take a few seconds to think. Then

we make our conclusions.

“Checkmated.”

“..... That’s a checkmate, yeah.”

Right then.

“Master!! I won!!”

My first apprentice bursts into the commentator’s hall, little feet tapping on the floor in a blur with her kitty cushion in her arms. Woah!

“What?! It’s already over?!”

“It hasn’t even been thirty minutes yet.”

“Finished before the countdown even started?”

“A grade schooler insta-killing a Women’s Leaguer?”

The crowd is stunned.

But Big Sis and myself, while a bit surprised, have no trouble calmly accepting what just happened.

Average Women’s League players don’t stand a chance against Ai’s late game. Ms. Hatatachi didn’t know that and stepped in hard to finish the game early with a big, aggressive push—but had the carpet pulled out from under her.

“..... We have a visitor, the first one to claim victory and qualify for the second and last round of the Mynavi Preliminary Matches, amateur Ai Hinatsuru. Come up onto the stage.”

Ai does what Big Sis asks and timidly climbs the stairs to join us.

The crowd is so shocked by what just happened they forgot to clap. A little intimidated by all the staring, Ai comes to a stop next to me.

“Ms. Hatatachi chose to use High Speed  7 Three Silver against your opening Central Rook So, you play Ranging Rook as well?”

“Ah, um, yes. Uhh, umm Oishi-sensei taught me, at the Gokigen Bathhouse,” Ai nervously answers Big Sis’s question.

That sure surprised the crowd.

“Oishi The Worldly Maestro?!”

“The Ryuo’s apprentice and the King’s student, eh?”

“Talk about a Kansai All-Star upbringing.”

“No wonder she’s so good”

The way the crowd looks at Ai is changing.

Whereas before they were thinking she was some idol in the making with dreams of stardom, now they’re starting to realize she’s got talent and skill.

Puffing out my chest with pride, in my head anyway, I lower my microphone to my waist so my apprentice can speak.

“Your Shogi was enough to take down a strong opponent. Tell us, what was going through your head during the match?”

“Okay! Um, I wanted to win no matter what today so——.”

“Ohh? Why is that?”

“Ummm T-That’s well”

Ai, squeezing the daylights out of the kitty cushion, starts mumbling.

“It’s It’s a secret!!” she yells, her face bright red. That got a round of applause and a big laugh from the crowd.

“A secret? Even from me?”

“Uwhee!? Uh, um Sorry! I can’t, say anything yet Especially to you, Master”

“Really? Now I’m kind of sad (haha)”

The crowd roars with laughter again.

At the same time, Big Sis——.

“..... Tsk! Tsk!”

Snapping her tongue, she keeps punching me in the kidneys at an angle where the crowd can't tell. Stop already, do you want me to piss blood and die in a few days?!

“M-Miss Hinatsuru will now go to another room to take pictures with Private Sponsors, so we'll end the interview right here! Now's your last chance to sign up!!” I announce to the crowd as I guide Ai toward the staff. Quite a few people in the crowd make a mad dash for the Private Sponsor reception desk. Ai is going to make a small fortune today

“Moving on Oh, this match looks like it's about to wrap up. Let's have a look at amateur Ai Yashajin vs. Suzu Kakkobayashi Women's League 5-*dan*.”

A different board shows up on the screen.

“This match features the youngest participant at nine years old against the eldest participant, sixty-seven. It's been an interesting match. Big Sis, what do you make of it so far?”

“Double Wing? But it became Double Reclining Silver into a Bishop exchange? What Shogi era is this?”

“Yes. This style is a little outdated but There are some new sequences in there too.”

“Such as?”

“It looked as though the Pawns in front of the Rooks were waiting for each other during the Bishop Exchange in this match. Ai Yashajin has a great feel for Bishop Exchange, so she guided the flow from Double Wing Attack to something she's more comfortable with. Very cunning.”

“..... Reminds me of someone.” Big Sis bluntly whispers. Terrifying.

“B- Bishop Exchange by itself is difficult because one mistake can ruin

everything, but having the Pawns waiting like that makes offensive pushes even more devastating. Let your guard down for a moment and it's all over Oh no. Kakkobayashi-sensei, not there. That was the worst move she could possibly have made."

The match was decided while I was in the middle of explaining the situation.

As should be expected from a veteran, Suzu Kakkobayashi surrendered with dignity and grace. Ai Yashajin appears in the commentator's hall moments later.

Big Sis points her microphone at her and says in her polite commentating voice, "Here we have the victor, amateur Ai Yashajin. How does it feel to be the youngest participant here today and the youngest ever to compete in Mynavi Women's Open?"

"I can hardly believe it."

Admirable words, but I can tell she's thinking: *Isn't it obvious?*

If I were to press the question further and ask: *What can't you believe?* there's no doubt in my mind she'd say: *That someone that weak is still playing in the Women's League.*

It'd be a good idea to change subjects to avoid that dangerous scenario.

"You challenged your opponent to use an older style of Shogi. Wasn't it a bit scary to try that against a veteran player? She is quite a bit more experienced with it——."

"The other way around."

"Other way?"

"Using outdated strategies against older opponents in classrooms makes them stop and try to remember how it's done."

"..... Ohh?"

"So they stare at the board, reliving old memories as they play. It breaks their

focus and they can't read as well. So I wanted to see if it would work on an el-
..... on a veteran player too."

She was about to say *elderly* wasn't she?

"Then again it doesn't look like that's going to work against my next opponent," says Ai, looking far off into the distance.

She's looking toward the someone standing next to the commentator hall entrance, waiting for her turn to come up to the stage with an idol-like smile on her face ... toward Tamayo Rokuroba Women's 2-*dan*.

ENEMY

“Out with it.”

The instant the staff told us to take a break in the commentary hall, Big Sis pulled me into the break room, shoved me against the wall and started the interrogation. She’s got me pinned ... except it’s with her foot rather than her fist

“What’s this *thing* Sainokami was talking about? What *answer* is she waiting for? I can hardly believe the two of you have ever even seen each other, let alone spoken. She seemed awfully friendly if you ask me.”

“..... I met her playing Shogi online in junior high school”

I planned on taking this to the grave with me but There’s no fooling Big Sis when she gets like this.

“*Here’s someone with an interesting style* I remember thinking back then, and we started playing a lot At some point we started using the chat feature after matches”

“Ohh? So, you were picking up girls in the chat?”

“No! I didn’t know who my opponent was and never thought they could possibly be a girl my age. Sure, we were playing on fast speed but they kept up with me when I was in the Sub League with a *dan* rank, so how could I know?”

“And? When did you first meet?”

“..... When I got 4-*dan*.”

I dig up some memories I was hoping to keep buried forever.

“Ika was already in the Women’s League and moved to Tokyo from the countryside to go to high school. I’d made the decision not to play Shogi on the

Internet once I got into the Sub League's 3-*dan* division, so I didn't pick up any bad habits——."

Shogi over the Internet feels so much different from playing someone face-to-face on a board.

I guess It feels *more like a game*.

Bad moves don't really matter because you can simply *reset after you die*, and manners don't matter much because *you can't see your opponent's face*.

Having that mindset as a Sub League member or pro in league matches is a pretty common way to end your career. Then there's the fact that you'll lose strong training partners if you make it that high up the ladder.

..... It's just ... *sometimes playing Shogi over the Internet is the only option——*.

"Ika lived in a small town in Tohoku without any strong opponents at all until she graduated junior high. That's why she *craved matches against me*.

"After turning pro in the fall of my last year in junior high, I started living on my own as soon as I graduated.

"Then, once I had Internet in my apartment, I decided to log on to Internet Shogi for the first time in a long time and Ika was there.

"I want to meet you.

"That's when that message came.

"I had a match in Tokyo, so we agreed to meet up at the Association She was just as surprised as I was. What were the chances we were both pros ... and to think that was Ika Sainokami the whole time?"

"..... And?"

Big Sis presses, her voice colder than the Arctic.

"Ika got all excited, saying it was *destiny* or something but yeah We started playing against each other whenever I had a match in Tokyo if our

schedules allowed it——.”

“So you were secretly dating a woman on your business trips, yes?”

“No, no! Versus matches!”

“Where did they happen? These versus matches?”

“Well cafés that had private rooms, karaoke boxes”

“That’s what dates are! I oughta shove a pike through your skull?!”

“W-What choice did we have?! The Tokyo Association isn’t like the one in Osaka! They don’t let players have Practice Sessions or versus matches in the building!! And I only met her a few times!!”

“..... And? I know there’s something you’re not telling me.”

“Yes. This is the important part.”

I brace myself and go right to the core.

“Right after I won the Ryuo Title Match, Ika sent me a message that said, *Date me——.*”

Wham!!

Big Sis’s low kick catches me square in the knees and I go down like a corn stalk cleaved down by a scythe.

“Hey?! W-Why’d you kick me?!”

“Huuh? I didn’t kick you.”

“You sure did?! Heck, you still are?!”

Wham!! Wham!! Wham!! Big Sis’s foot mercilessly rains down on me as I curl up into a ball on the floor.

“Some girl liked you, so what? You got full of yourself and put the moves on her, didn’t you?”

“I-I said no! There’s nothing between us, absolutely nothing!!”

“But she’s still waiting for an answer, right? Knowing you, you’ve left her hanging, keeping her as a backup until you want her ... like some piece on your piece stand.”

“I told her no, I swear! I don’t even play against her anymore!! We’re over, finished!!”

“Oh, so she’s an ex?”

“I’m telling you, she’s not!!”

That’s when.

“Master? Are you in here?”

A knock on the break room door and Ai Hinatsuru’s voice.

“Ai’s photo session is still going on, so she asked me to go get something for lu-ahh ahhhhhh——!!”

What she saw when she opened the door——me on the floor against the wall with Big Sis slamming her foot into my ribs. Ai rushes in to stop the brutality.

“Wh-What’re you doing!? Why’re you hurting Master?!”

“Don’t get in the way. I’m extracting information about his ex-girlfriend.”

“Okay. Let’s hear every detail.”

Ai puts her kitty cushion down on the floor and sits on her ankles on top of it. She’s there for the duration!

Using my arm to protect my head from Big Sis’s heel, I get up just enough to ask my apprentice.

“A-Ai How’re the others?”

“Ai’s photo session won’t end any time soon and Keika’s match ended in a draw, so she’s still playing. But that’s not important. Master? Who is your ex-girlfriend? Do I know her? Are you still in contact with her? Does keeping this a secret from Auntie and I mean that you still have feelings for her?”

“C-Calm down! And she’s not my ex-girlfriend!!”

This girl’s relentless?!

“Sainokami,” Big Sis tells Ai while driving the heel of her loafer deep into my side.

“That’s his ex’s name. I’m sure you’ve heard of her.”

“Isn’t she who I’m playing next?!”

“Apprentice meets ex in the final round, funny how things work out. Which are you rooting for, Yaichi?”

“Listen, she’s not my ex-girlfriend! But, yes Ai. She’s your next opponent.”

Ika only had three minutes of waiting time because she was late for the first round, but she won without breaking a sweat.

Her opponent was Kazumi Houroku women’s 3-*dan*: the same person who overwhelmed Keika in the challenge matches, no pushover.

And Ika treated Houroku women’s 3-*dan* ... like a little kid.

“..... I really don’t think I should tell you about this before your match. But since you’ve heard this much, not knowing the rest would make it hard to concentrate on your match, so I’ll talk——.”

Then I tell Ai everything I told Big Sis.

Once I was done, Ai said, “Basically an ex-girlfriend.”

“Why?! Why is that the only name for her?!”

Big Sis and Ai are usually at each other’s throats, but this part of them is eerily similar.

“It’s not like Ika She doesn’t like me at all. She wants a personal Shogi training partner all to herself all so that she can get stronger.”

Extreme egotism. That’s how Ms. Shakando described her.

“I asked her why she wanted to date me. What do you think her answer was? Because *I’m good at Shogi ... I can play Shogi with you as much as I want if we’re dating.* Would you be happy if someone said that?”

“.....”

“She even told me not to play against anyone else. She said if I had that much free time on my hands, she wanted me to play against her. When she told me with a straight face that I should prioritize her over my league matches, I thought she’d lost her mind.

“Ika made her feelings perfectly clear last winter at the Shinjuku Gyoen National Garden: *If I have you, Yaichi, I don’t need anything else.*

“With that, I watched her take off her glasses, watch, shoes, she even took her wallet out of her purse and threw them all into the pond At first, I thought she was being overdramatic to get my attention.

“But she was far more serious than I ever imagined.

“She was sounding and acting crazy, so I tried to put some distance between us when I said no. I used my losing streak at the time as an excuse, telling her I wanted to *focus on Shogi.*

“Ika didn’t give up. It didn’t matter how many times I turned her down.

“That’s when the incident happened.

“I’m coming i~n.

“I thought she was joking around when I got that message, but when I went back to my apartment right afterward and found her lining up pieces on my Shogi board with a big smile on her lips, she said, *Yaichi. Let’s play Shogi*≡

“As if trying to prove her point, that screw-loose smile was the only thing she had on while sitting in front of the board.

“In other words, she was butt naked.

"I love you≡ I don't need anything else≡≡≡

"I ran away, screaming at the top of my lungs all the way to Master Kiyotaki's house and begged him for help.

"Once he knew what was happening, Master talked with Ika's Master and I hadn't seen her since ...

"...Until two weeks ago——on the day of the challenge matches."

"What is this girl?! Showing up at Master's house, unannounced and n-naked She sounds like a total pervert!!" yells Ai once I finish talking. Big Sis looks at her and jerks her head to the side.

"Well, that's strange. I seem to remember hearing something right up that alley not too long ago"

"I wrote Master a letter first and had clothes on!!"

"Sure, sure."

Big Sis barely acknowledges the grade schooler's outburst and turns her ice-cold glare back to me.

"And? Who else knows about this?"

"Master Kiyotaki, Ika's Master And the association Board of Directors. I think Ms. Shakando knows about it too. Since Ika doesn't listen to what her Master says, the Women's League might've had to step in.

"Despite all that, they couldn't even keep her in check for a year.

"Ika is my problem, and I accept that. I sowed the seeds that got me into this mess"

"Then I ran away, leaving other people to clean it up.

"If I were still living alone, it might be okay to talk with Master Kiyotaki again and let the cycle continue.

"But now, I have Ai."

“.....!”

Big Sis and Ai gasp at the same time.

“I must protect my live-in apprentice. That’s why I have to make sure there’s no chance Ika will ever show up at the apartment again. I’ll take care of this myself this time.”

Before, it was just a private issue between two titleholders, so it could be taken care of under wraps.

“This is no time to be worried about the Shogi world’s reputation or damaging my title. Now that there’s something much more important on the line, I should’ve taken care of it much sooner Ai, I’m sorry you had to hear this right before an important match——.”

“.....”

Ai is sitting on her ankles, silently staring at the floor.

Did I scare her? She’s probably shaken at the very least.

Pathetic I failed as a Master.

Just as I was starting to hate myself——Ai says in a wispy voice.

“..... When Sainokami-*sensei* tells Master she I-loves him It bothers you, right?”

“Hm? Y-Yeah Of course. I don’t have any feelings for her at all.”

“Understood.”

Ai straightens her posture and clenches her fists right above her knees.

“So that she doesn’t bother Master anymore I’ll tell her no for you on the board!!”

RECORD 5

PLAYER INTRODUCE

Ika Sainokami

PLAYER NUMBER: 49

BIRTHDATE: 4/9/2000

HOMETOWN: Oshu City, Iwate Prefecture

MASTER: Ryuji Subeta 5-dan

TITLE HISTORY:

TOTAL TITLE MATCH APPEARANCES:	2
TOTAL TITLES:	2 seasons

THE LAST PRELIMINARY MATCH

“It’s impossible. She can’t win.”

I repeat myself again and again in the commentator’s break room once Ai was gone.

Even if their talent is about the same, Ika has more experience, better senses, she’s been under this much pressure before and holds a major advantage in everything that matters. Obviously. An elementary school girl who started Shogi not even seven months ago is playing against a Women’s League title holder No matter how many times I simulate the match in my head, I don’t see Ai winning a single game. She doesn’t stand a chance.

“Really? I admit there’s a skill gap, but there’s no way to know who’ll win without opening the lid.”

“Big Sis, you saw her match too, right? Ika against Ms. Houroku in the first round.”

Ika started the match with only three minutes of waiting time because she was late and then used all of it on her first move. She played one-minute Shogi from there on and won.

Using those three minutes on her first move was taunting, clear as day.

Even against a title holder, no one is going to let their opponent openly mock them by throwing away their waiting time after being late on purpose without teaching them a lesson. Kazumi Houroku Women’s 3-*dan* fought in a blaze of fury—justified fury.

Ms. Houroku would’ve defeated Ika if we were living in a fairy tale. Even here, in the real world, winning against an opponent with zero waiting time is only natural.

But Ika won. Flawlessly.

And Ms. Houroku collapsed in tears.

A bona fide Women's League player, a player who has defeated an A League pro bawled her eyes out on the spot in front of a live audience ... turned into an inconsolable pile right in front of the board. It was so bad, she needed help getting out of her chair.

Watching her there, writhing from a wounded heart, I couldn't help but see the same thing happening to Ai.

"Her Shogi ... she was sending me a message. Because she's not getting her way she'll destroy everything important to me."

"What are you going to do about it? Stop the match? Tell the pipsqueak to *forfeit because winning is hopeless?*"

"I, um"

"You can't stop this from happening. No player can stop a public match. And the pipsqueak, she won't be stopped."

So that she doesn't bother Master anymore I'll tell her no for you on the board!!

That's what Ai said before dashing out of the break room.

Judging by what happened, it looks like I'm the one that lit her fire.

A Master who can't even watch his apprentice's battle from the board side.

I'm powerless.

There's nothing I can do. Not as her Master, not as a player.

Also as a person.

"Now ... it's starting."

"..... Yes."

I stagger to my feet with Big Sis prodding me forward.

A thunderous round of applause greets us as we leave the break room and climb onto the stage.

“Thank you for your patience. Pre-match coverage and analysis for the last preliminary matches is about to begin. I’m Ginko Sora, the commentator for these matches and Yaichi Kuzuryu-*Ryuo* will do analysis.”

“..... Glad to be here.”

People are crammed into the commentator’s hall like sardines. Every single one of them can’t wait for the battles that are about to unfold.

Everyone except me.

“The match between Sainokami-*Empress* and amateur Ai Hinatsuru has become the talk of the tournament. How will the amateur grade schooler making her tournament debut face the Women’s League title holder? Our coverage will primarily focus on this match.”

“.....”

“Kuzuryu-*sensei*. What kind of Shogi do you think your apprentice will show us?”

“..... That’s ... a good question”

There’s an image of the arena projected on the big screen—with Ai and Ika sitting across a board from each other right in the center.

Ika looks like she couldn’t care less as the match recorder prepares the piece flip. Ai is in her usual posture, sitting on her ankles, quietly watching from her chair.

—Please, at least let Ai have the first move!

While I don’t think my prayers had anything to do with it, Ai will be on offense.

“Sainokami-*Empress* is very good. Overwhelmingly good”

I know that better than anyone. Me, who’s played more Shogi against Ika than anyone.

At the same time, I also know how big the gap between Ai and Ika actually is.

Clutching my microphone in both hands like clinging to the last hope, I say, “But when it comes to talent, my apprentice is better!”

—WHHHHOOOOOAAAAA!!

That got the crowd riled up. Applause and cheers are erupting all over the place.

Then———it’s time.

An arena full of women who differ in age, height and playing style all bow in unison.

One noticeably high voice, one that I hear every day, comes through the hall’s speakers.

“When you’re ready!!”

Ai advances the Pawn in front of her Rook with gusto. The battle has begun.

WOMEN'S BATTLE

Ai Yashajin was calm.

Even on the final stage of the preliminary matches, she was confident that she would win.

Ai's unwavering confidence came from the fact that she had thoroughly studied all of the Mynavi participants since the challenge matches, dissecting each one of their match records and strategies.

That includes the opponent sitting across from her right now.

Tamayo Rokuroba. Ranging Rook Party. Seventy percent of her match records are Fourth File Rook, the remaining thirty percent are Third File Rook. She's experimented with Open Bishop Path strategies recently but fails to use them properly. Never makes anaguma. Conclusion——weakling.

The only reason she failed to recognize Tamayo in the waiting room was she simply didn't remember her face. Shogi style was the only thing that mattered to Ai Yashajin, opponent's faces were of little importance. For no matter what face they made——.

"She's going to slide her Rook."

".....?!"

"Is that what you're thinking? I can see it in your eyes," said Tamayo as she opened the match with a move that Ai never anticipated.

——First move, 2 Six Pawn.

".....?!"

All of Ai's research was now worthless.

Because *Tamayo Rokuroba, who only plays Ranging Rook in league matches,*

just declared she would use Static Rook.

“..... Now I see. This is your ace in the hole?”

Despite being unprepared, Ai was calm.

No matter what her opponent had planned, Ai was more than happy to fight Static Rook against Static Rook. She then thrust the Pawn in front of her own Rook forward, barely using an instant of waiting time. Ai Yashajin was calm.

Tamayo’s first move deviated from her research.

But Tamayo Rokuroba’s second move destroyed her tranquility.

—2 Five Pawn.

Ai’s long black hair billowed out as a wave of anger washed over her on sight.

“..... Lady!”

Double Wing Attack.

Her Master, Ryuo Yaichi Kuzuryu’s specialty.

It was also the same strategy Ai had used with great success in her previous match. Even after seeing that with her own eyes, Tamayo decided to test her with this strategy. There was only one thing this could be: a taunt. Simultaneously, an obvious trap.

Trigger it or avoid it.

Theoretically, Ai has those two options available—.

“..... As you wish.”

For the girl named Ai Yashajin, the option of turning down someone asking for a fight didn’t exist.

Flicking her black hair out like a bird’s wing, Ai advanced the same Pawn forward and said, “Come. I’ll dance for you.”

“Dance with death, brat.”

Tamayo Rokuroba's King still in the starting position, a Sitting King, she advanced on Ai's defenses with all speed——!!

Keika Kiyotaki was tired.

"Hff Hfff Haaa——"

She was out of breath just sitting at the board.

Keika tried to steady herself with a series of deep breaths, but it was no use. After having to redo her first match since it ended in a draw, she was now facing the reality of a third consecutive match. Her physical and mental energy were taxed to their limits.

Keika, who had never experienced continued success, had now won six consecutive matches, including the challenge matches. Accumulating that many victories was new territory for her and didn't feel real. She was already beyond her breaking point.

Now, Sen Kouzui was sitting across from her.

Since Sen had fought her way all the way to the last round, a victory against Keika would elevate her to Women's League 2-*kyu*——make her a full-fledged Women's League member, not just the *licensed trainee* she was now.

On the flip side, lose and her dream was over. Keika was also in the same position.

(..... At least one of us will get a step closer, so that's better than nothing)

Normally Keika would have been much more conflicted.

However Keika was tired. She didn't have the energy.

(Anyway I just need to play a good game. Play well enough not to be embarrassed that fans are watching)

Keika repeated that in her head like a mantra as she waited for Sen to make

the match's first move.

Two minutes after the starting call—Sen reached for a piece after using an unusually large amount of waiting time for a match that only allowed thirty minutes to begin with. What's more, it was an unusual move.

—1st move, 7 Eight Gold.

“Huh?!”

Keika's eyes flew open in disbelief, leaning in for a closer look as soon as her opponent's hand moved out of the way.

Then, she looked up at the expression on Sen's face.

“.....”

Her turn finished, Sen was still looking down, her mouth nothing but a tense line above her chin.

That move was a challenge, a well-known invitation.

So, you think you can play Ranging Rook? Why not prove it?

It was that kind of move.

She purposefully put herself at a disadvantage in order to prevent her opponent's best strategy. Sen's first move was a bet. *She made Keika Kiyotaki, a Static Rook party member, play Ranging Rook.*

Had this been the first match of the day, chances are Keika would have spent more time debating her options.

However—Keika was tired. She didn't have the energy to play mind games.

“Haaaaaa—”

Without realizing it, her ragged breaths had become steady.

“..... Hn!”

Keika *slid her Rook* without a second thought.

The two women would realize it when the match was over.

Realize, that in that moment, the match had already been decided.

THUNDERBOLT

Everyone's mouths go bone dry watching that first move.

"All eyes are on Miss Sainokami's opening move Although there's no telling what she will do," says Big Sis, fingers tightly wrapped around her microphone.

Ika Sainokami is grinning across the board at Ai as she reaches toward her Rook on the right-hand side.

—Now, how far will she slide it?

That's the question on everyone's mind, but Ika didn't pick up her Rook.

She grabbed a Pawn. But not just any—.

"Edge Pawn?!"

First move—9 Four Pawn.

This isn't just unexpected. Moving the edge Pawn forward is the same as giving yourself a handicap.

".....!!"

It's a blatant taunt. But Ai keeps her cool and advances the Pawn in front of her Rook one space further.

Ika responds by opening her Bishop's Path. A pretty orthodox move, but

"..... Kuzuryu-*sensei*. What do you think Miss Sainokami is trying to do?"

"I can't tell what she's planning But Miss Hinatsuru must stay calm and choose her moves wisely. The first one to break under pressure loses a Bishop Exchange-style match. Keeping her Bishop's Path closed is certainly on the table."

But, after a bit of thinking, Ai opens the path. That's as good as saying: *I'll take*

you head on and win.

“Yhhi!”

Ika makes a sound somewhere between a laugh and a hiccup as she reaches out toward Ai’s Bishop, and takes it. Ai completes the exchange.

Then, Ika grabs her Rook on her next turn and——.

“Hihi! Face——to-o-o-o——face!!”

Slides it all the way down to where her Bishop was. This is?!

“Dai——!!”

Once we saw that, Big Sis and I blurt out what she’s about to do.

What it’s called when the two Rooks are lined up across from each other——.

“Direct Opposing Rook!!”

Big Sis asks me in a discreet voice to hide her own surprise.

“Kuzuryu-*sensei*, what kind of strategy is this?”

“It starts as regular Bishop Exchange Fourth File Rook, but one player moves their Rook over to line up with their opponent’s. Since that takes a lot of turns to set up, directly shifting the Rook into the same column to save time is called the Direct Opposing Rook strategy.”

“Sounds very aggressive”

“It is. The match turns into a power struggle. Only a handful of professional players can pull it off”

I don’t think I have to say it, but I’ve never seen a Women’s League player use it before.

Therefore, this’ll be Ai’s first time going against this strategy.

“.....?!”

With no idea what’s coming next, uncertainty flashes across Ai’s face. Her hand stops in midair.

But Ai is burning with vengeance. She advances the Golds and Silvers normally used for defense across the board in a high-speed rush. She must be planning to use her first move advantage to crush the attack in the early game before it gets going.

Ika keeps pace, advancing right along with her.

Watching these two, it feels like the first one to run out of waiting time will lose. Neither is stopping to think. Standards don’t really exist for this strategy, so that’s the last thing I expected to see.

“..... Yaichi. What do you think *that’s* after?”

Big Sis switches off her microphone to talk with me and refers to a Women’s League title holder as *that*. She must hate her so much she doesn’t want to say her name

“..... She’ll probably shift the Rook from the second column to the fourth. That way, Ai’s forward Pawn becomes useless——.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Come again?”

“*That* may be playing against a mere grade school girl, but why choose a risky strategy like Direct Opposing Rook? There are much simpler ways to win, like Ishida Style or Central Rook.”

Putting in the way

I doubt that Ika has any experience with Direct Opposing Rook to begin with. Doing research is next to impossible because almost no pros play it.

So it all comes down to the live match. It’s talent against talent.

“And why do you think *that* is being so quiet? If the two of you saw each other at the challenge matches, there’ve been plenty of chance for *that* to make passes at you.”

“You’re right But, then why?”

“You see ... *that’s* trying to prove something. That she’s better. That she’s more talented than your chosen apprentice. That’s why she waited for a chance to play against her. *That* isn’t out to destroy the pipsqueak or to have fun at your expense. *Extreme egotists only think about themselves.*”

So, basically, this match is——.

“A love letter. From a twisted vixen,” hisses Big Sis as she stomps on my foot. Owch.

And the match is going exactly how Ika planned. She dodged Ai’s rushed attack with no problem.

“Agh gh,” Ai groans in pain. Hand hovering, her waiting time is ticking away.

“You ... you’re Yaichi’s live-in apprentice, aren’cha?”

Ika suddenly strikes up conversation.

“Must be so nice. You play Shogi with Yaichi every single day, don’cha? Learning this move and that move, always playing with Yaichi While he refuses to play with me no matter how much I ask, you get to play every single day, every single day, every single day, every single day, every single day——.”

This is not normal, seeing someone shudder like a broken machine and talking to their opponent in the middle of a match.

“.....?! ”

Ai is ignoring her, looking at the board instead. But I can tell she’s shaken. I don’t blame her.

The Sub League member working as their match recorder looks like he wants to say something, wondering if he should step in. It's just that Ika isn't breaking any rules. Horrible manners though

To make matters worse, fans in the audience are going nuts, applauding and cheering the eccentric player.

"Sparky's off-the-board tactics just went into overdrive——!!"

"Now that's what I came here to see!"

Crazed fans cheering for her put wind in her sails, and Ika pushes the envelope even further. Egging on someone like her gives them more and more ideas and they become impossible to rein in.

"Ever wanted what someone else has so bad it hurts? I'll teach'cha what it's like——." Then Ika picked up the Bishop she'd deployed next to her King and said with a bizarre spark in her eyes, "Worldliness."

A ferocious flash of light sweeps across the board.

".....!!"

It's a beautiful light that only players can see. Pieces collide in flashes, creating a brilliant otherworldly spectacle of continuous annihilation.

But this massive pillar of light zips down in a vertical column to strike a single piece, leaving only a barren square in its wake.

Her worldliness——is a thunderbolt!!

"Is she numb?"

I bite down on my lip. When two worldly players face off, the defender has the advantage.

In Shogi, the word *numb* is used to describe how one player is caught completely off guard and loses their formation in the blink of an eye.

Ika's worldliness is different from other Women's League players at the most

basic level. Striking the board time and again, her thunderbolts numb opponents in one strike.

I thought Ika would extend her lead bit by bit but——.

“Have annnnnother!!”

“?!”

Worldly Thunder lands yet again!

It was a vertical strike last time, but this worldly thunderbolt came in from the side! A dastardly plan to turn Ai’s King into a naked, sitting duck!

“..... Is she going for a final push?”

“S-Sure looks that way”

I concentrate on the board to read what could happen next along with Big Sis. Average people can’t read the plan behind successive vertical and horizontal worldly strikes, but it slowly starts revealing itself.

“Ugh Khhh?!”

“Hyeee hihihihhi haaa!!”

Ai’s face contorts with the fear of not knowing where the next punch is coming from. Ika’s pieces are running rampant across the board.

Then——victory was in her sight.

“Theeere. That’s—a—check—path!”

All she has to do is take the abandoned Gold in the middle of the board and Ai’s King is as good as checkmated.

Even Big Sis, as good as she is, could only marvel at Ika’s second level of worldliness.

“She’s strong”

Seeing this just reminded me how much.

Woman's League Empress Ika Sainokami——is horrifyingly strong!

“.....”

Backed into a corner, Ai endures by squeezing her knees. She's holding out, thinking as hard as she can. Maybe she's going through her defensive options?

But, even if she holds off this attack

“Saaay,” Ika says, leaning down over the board to look up at Ai.

“How ‘bout when I win, I get to take your place.”

“.....?”

Ai looks up from the board at her opponent for the first time.

Ika leans even further forward, hovering over her chair, getting so close to Ai that their noses almost touch. She starts snapping her front teeth together and says, “Don't you think it's a waste? Yaichi having to play against a talentless nobody? So let's swap. That way I can get much, much stronger.”

“.....?!”

Surprise shows up on Ai's face.

Then——rage.

“Think how fun it'll be. If I were living with Yaichi, he'd play so much Shogi with me every single day. The two of us would go somewhere every day, and just play, play, play, play, play, play, play, play, play, play with nobody else, just us playing, playing, playing, playing, playing, playing, playing, playing——.”

Listening to all that, for some reason it was Big Sis who spoke up, not Ai. And in a frigid tone. “..... Well, someone sure likes you. Why not just live with her? That would solve everything.”

“Say what?! No! I don't want her anywhere near my apartment!”

“Uh-huh. So then, you really prefer grade schoolers?”

“Why do you always say stuff like that?! I’m not interested in little girls all, it’s Ai’s passion and talent that——.”

“..... You idiot.”

It kind of feels like Big Sis is picking a fight with me. Also, kind of cute. What’s been up with her recently?

But that’s not important right now.

“It’s sooooo boring. Every single day. Every single match is so boring. Women’s League players, you know.”

Ika keeps blabbering on.

It’s not like she’s talking to Ai though, more like to everyone here No, like she wants *the whole Shogi world* to hear.

“Ginko Sora, Rina Shakando, Ryou Tsukiyomizaka, Machi Kugui, they’re all fakes. None of ’em *can see a damn thing*.”

“.....”

After being called fake, the temperature around Big Sis plummets, chilling me to the bone. Naniwa’s Snow White is angry. *That girl* is gonna die

But, Big Sis didn’t try to deny her.

Ika played against Big Sis once before and lost.

The reason——she broke the rules.

But it didn’t have anything to do with the game. She put *a piece she captured on Big Sis’s piece stand*.

Ika was so absorbed in the match that she tried to force what she read would happen in a few moves on the board. Big Sis didn’t read that far ahead.

That’s why everyone thought the same thing when Ika threw in the towel, and Big Sis admitted it.

Big Sis won the match but Ika was more talented.

“Once Yaichi teaches me everything he knows, I’ll take every title in the Women’s League for myself, then join the Sub League and become the first full female pro before Ginko. Then nobody’ll need Women’s League players. Watching talentless weaklings play Shogi makes me wanna hurl.”

Ika’s picking up speed and volume, one notch away from screaming.

“All of ’em are stupid, one-trick ponies playing Mino Castles! Ranging Rook without a speck of sense! Trying out Static Rook without learning the standards, treating it like some fashion statement! I’m rotting, playing against weaklings like them all the time! It’s torture, having to live and rot every siiiingle daaaaaay!!”

“.....!!”

Big Sis grinds her molars together. Her hand is shaking, microphone clenched in her grip.

The only reason she’s not saying anything—the sheer level of talent Ika is putting on display is just that overwhelming.

In the Shogi world, strength is everything.

With strength, you can do no wrong. But if you’re weak, your very humanity gets rejected.

Ika Sainokami is an extreme egotist. She wholeheartedly believes that her talent makes her the strongest, and that that means everything else exists only for her.

If the Shogi world’s system is designed to find the strongest talent, then it’ll accept her way of thinking. If the Shogi world is built solely on talent, then what Ika said is the truth. Surprisingly, she’s made the same conclusion as Ms. Shakando.

But even if it’s true, I don’t want to raise Ai to become someone like Ika.

Both women may have the same *strength* and be part of the Women's League, but Ms. Shakando and Ika couldn't be more different.

What I want is for Ai to become a Women's League player like Ms. Shakando.

Someone that's not just a strong player but has a strong heart to match. That's what makes a true Women's League player.

Someone who won't give up just because of a talent gap, someone who isn't afraid to get muddy holding out as long as they can and keeps trying no matter what a player like Ginko Sora.

So.

"..... Take her down, Ai."

Take down that monster who only knows how to sit on the talent she was born with like a pedestal and look down on everyone else. Take down the extreme egotist who only thinks about herself.

—Destroy that idiot who thinks she's the only one suffering!!

Did my thoughts get through to her?

"..... Here."

"Nhee?"

"Here, here, here, here, here, here, here,
herehereherehereherehereherehereherehere."

Ai's body starts swinging back and forth like a crazed metronome.

Her big, round eyes open even wider as her pupils zoom left and right. Those whispers I've heard so many times coming from her mouth, Ai leans so far downward that the tip of her nose brushes against the board.

Ika wasn't the only one surprised by this bizarre sight. The whole gallery is so shocked they don't know what to think.

That's right. All of you: take a look.

Look at my apprentice, precious enough to give you chills.

My apprentice, intense enough to make your spirits tremble!!

“Hereherehereherehereherehereherehereherehereherehereherehereher
Okay!!”

Ai makes a strong nod and rises to her knees on her chair.

Then, she looks down on Ika Sainokami with an arrogant stare and declares.

“About your proposal.”

“Ah gh?”

“I refuse!!!!”

With that, Ai reaches as far forward as her little body will go and snaps a piece down onto the board.

“..... Huuh? Haaaaagh?!”

Ika’s eyes rocket open once she sees it.

Ai’s move—wasn’t defensive. But to *go on the attack* ... she put the enemy King in check with a 5 Three Gold!!

“Cutting corners?! Here? Now?!”

“..... Nice!”

Big Sis quietly screams while I nod.

Yes. That’s the only option. I’ve been waiting for my apprentice to press forward. No amount of defense will win a match if you can’t put pressure on the enemy King. You have to be brave and step forward.

Go! Ai!!

Take another step!!!

“Heehee! Check, huuuh? You ain’t scaaaaaarin’ meeeeeeeee!”

Ika’s King escapes to 7 One where it’s safe behind a Gold and Silver, an iron wall.

It looks like she got away but——.

“——Here!!”

Ai pushes even closer.

Her Gold slips through the iron wall to 6 Two all by itself!

Ika shrieks with laughter.

“Givin’ me that Gold for free?! Haaaaa?! Whaaat?! What foooooooooor?!”

“.....!!”

I can hear Big Sis grinding her molars from here.

It’s not just Ika.

Big Sis didn’t see it either.

But once Ai made her move, they realized just how perfect it was.

“..... Whaa?”

She blinks several times a split second behind Big Sis.

“Ah Huh? What, what, what? That’s not right. How could? How’s Whaaat?”

Her head swaying back and forth like a pendulum on her shoulders, Ika starts to piece together the strange thing happening on the board.

Then, her pupils shrink into tiny little dots.

“I’m losing?”

It’s not to that point yet But her formation collapses into chaos.

Ai’s sudden advance must’ve been the last thing she expected because Ika

cautiously, meekly takes the Gold that charged into her territory.

That opened a seam.

And that's——.

“Here!!”

Ai deploys a Rook right to enemy territory using zero waiting time.

Ika moves to block it, but Ai follows through by slicing the Rook across the board like a long sword sweep to the very center, 5 Five, and then flips it over to promote.

——Dragon King, Ryuo.

The Promoted Rook, also called a Dragon, the strongest piece in the game appearing in the middle of the board is Ai's eloquent answer.

“I am the Ryuo’s first apprentice!! I won’t let you have that!!”

I’m not the only one invigorated by that move.

“Ahah!”

Ika looks up from the board and stares right at Ai’s face.

“Ahahaa! Sooo That’s how it is.”

Her pupils are huge. It’s like she’s looking at something in a completely different world.

“You You can see too!!”

Saying that, Ika jumps up on the spot. Her bare feet land on the edge of her chair as she hunches over the board and starts playing Shogi like a gargoyle sitting atop an old European castle.

Unprecedented match posture.

“Heeheehee! Hehehehehehehehehehe!!”

“Herehereherehereherehereherehere-
herehereherehereherehere—————.”

Ika, squatting on the edge of her chair, and Ai, sitting on her ankles in hers.

Both are reading the board like wildfire in their postures of choice.

This contest of talent titans that extends beyond the Women’s League realm turns into a battle of brute force. On the board and off the board, this match is anything but normal.

“Blaaaaaaaaaaaaaa————zing!!”



It's gotten so intense that Ika rears her head back and howls at the ceiling. She even rips off the ribbon around her neck in mid howl before deploying a Gold right in front of Ai's Promoted Rook. Only someone without all the lights on upstairs would act like that. This is a tournament, with a live audience

But the staff doesn't step in. The players are making moves back and forth so fast there's no time to interrupt the match.

Then again who would ever dream of interrupting a match this intense?

Who could ever look away from Shogi with this kind of speed?

"Here!!"

Ai makes her move without using a second of waiting time! I mean, Ika's fingers had just let go of her piece and *snap!* Again and again!

"Heehee! Who do you think I aaaaaam?! Girrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrly!!"

Ika is also playing at breakneck speed. Each of her moves takes only a second or two.

Worldly Thunder prides herself on talent and speed. I bet anything her pride wouldn't let a nameless grade school girl out-speed her. However——.

"Here!!!"

"Heehe!!"

"Here!!"

"Hee He!"

"!!"

"Nghh?! Hn Heehee!!"

Ika, keeping pace with Ai's no-time onslaught, pauses for a moment to think it over with her hand still in the air. She can't keep up anymore.

"Sainokami-*Empress*, you have no waiting time remaining. Please proceed

with one-minute Shogi.”

The match recorder turns off the chess clock and picks up a stopwatch.

I’m not sure when it happened, but the waiting-time tables have turned.

Murmurs of disbelief pass through the crowd.

“..... Sparky’s run out of waiting time before an opponent?!”

“T-That’s gotta be a first?”

“Holy! That little girl She isn’t just some kid!!”

Shogi fans watching other matches start gravitating toward this one. It’s like their board is a shining beacon of light drawing everyone closer.

A Dragon sits in the middle of the board at 5 Five.

“Heehee hee Hghh, gh?”

Any novice would take it in a heartbeat, but Ika has left it alone.

It’s pinned down, she even deployed a Gold to keep it that



way, but for some reason Ika isn't taking it.

She's reached toward the center of the board over and over, but then recoiled like she got zapped by static electricity every time.

Ai is sending Ika a message over the board, more like a questioning challenge.

—*Can you take my Dragon?! Do you have the guts?!*

Big Sis whispers to me in a puzzled voice, "She's not pulling the 5 Five Promoted Rook back?"

"That's the right move."

"Huh? But——."

"It is. Without that Dragon, Ai will lose. But she can't win without it either In that case, *the best choice is to leave it there and put pressure on Ika with speed and force her to make a mistake.*"

"?! She figured all that out ... that fast? The pipsqueak?"

She did.

Since Ai can see what the pieces do without reading the board, she can work out these situations faster than Big Sis. I figured out what Ai's going for because I can do the same thing.

I'm pretty sure Ika can see just like us too, but the pressure from having to instantaneously read the board and being afraid of what Ai can do is slowing down her thought process just a tick.

"Hee heehee!"

Then, Ika messes up.

Nah ... saying Ai's aura made her mess up would be closer to the truth. She tried to defend without taking the Dragon.

Ika accepts it ... accepts that the grade schooler sitting in front of her is better than she is.

“Here!”

Ai opens a Check Path right away and Ika defends.

That move sealed it.

“It’s over.”

“Yeah. This match is over.”

Big Sis calls it just as I was about to.

Ika keeps putting Ai’s King into check, struggling until the end, but Ai didn’t even need to deploy pieces from her stand. She simply slid her King out of harm’s way and it was all for naught. Of course, she did it without using any waiting time at all. Ai’s fury is behind it all.

Women’s League Empress Ika Sainokami had drawn Ai into Direct Opposing Rook, a strategy she’d never seen before, and hit her with two worldly thunderbolts to build a commanding lead.

Ika had far more experience and game sense, had overcome pressure before and even possessed better reading ability.

But there was one place just one where Ai was more talented than Ika. Something important that Ai had that Ika didn’t.

That’s—an unbreakable spirit.

“Gheheehee Y-You’re goood.”

Sounding like the last gasp of a dying extreme egotists, Ika slaps all the pieces on her piece stand onto the board to signal she’s throwing in the towel.

TAMAYO ROKUROBA

The match between Ai Yashajin and Tamayo Rokuroba turned into a one-sided offensive onslaught by the elder player.

However—Tamayo was starting to sense her own weakness.

“..... Damn this brat!”

Crick, crick!

Biting down so hard her opponent could hear her teeth grind, Tamayo glared at the nine-year-old girl.

After successfully goading her into a Double Wing Attack, she should be leading at this point.

“..... Should be, should be!”

Tamayo’s King was still sitting—meaning she hadn’t spent a single turn on defense. However, her offensive typhoon had about as much effect on the nine-year-old sitting across from her as a mid-summer breeze.

Hardly even blinking in the face of a Women’s League player’s assault, one more than twice her age, Ai Yashajin evaded the barrage by the slimmest of margins and had yet to make a single mistake. She had plenty of opportunities to preemptively cut off the attacks but waited until the last possible move to do so, prolonging the sequences but defending each one.

Almost as if she were gauging Tamayo Rokuroba’s talent level

“..... Spoiled brat I’ll squash you like a bug”

She could beat anyone if she tried hard enough.

There was a time when Tamayo was sure of it. It didn’t matter if her opponent was the Eternal Queen, Rina Shakando-*Women’s Legend*, she thought

she could win as long as she didn't make a mistake. That included going against spoiled brats.

That confidence was shaken for the first time—four years ago.

It was right here, in the last round of the Mynavi Preliminary Matches when she lost to a girl in elementary school Tamayo Rokuroba realized—she hadn't been chosen by the Shogi gods.

That was her only match against the terrifyingly talented girl with silver hair. Earning a rematch would require her to challenge the girl for her title ... Tamayo wasn't strong enough to make it that far

“..... Solid”

The wall separating her from Ginko Sora and this elementary school girl felt impenetrable.

It wasn't as simple as talent or momentum.

Tamayo Rokuroba had fought against many Women's League players, but the girl in front of her now had a Shogi style she'd never seen before. Ai Yashajin's Shogi itself felt thick.

To her, it was like punching a solid wall.

The wall wouldn't budge no matter how many punches she threw. In fact, it was her fists that were breaking.

“..... Those defenses are pitiful, openings all over the place but!” Tamayo whispered, clearly irritated but even more impressed.

She couldn't care less if her opponent heard her. For Tamayo Rokuroba, what happened on the board is all that mattered.

Because no one can lie on a Shogi board, nor would they want to.

“..... Solid!” Tamayo whispered again, every one of her attempts to break Ai Yashajin's defensive formation falling short and watching in awe as

they somehow got stronger at the same time.

Amount of research.

Reading ability.

But above all the amount of *thought* that went into Ai's each and every move far outclassed her.

"..... What in the world could possibly ... who could've taught a nine-year-old to play like this?"

The immense shadow cast by the research behind Ai Yashajin's moves struck fear into Tamayo's heart.

—She thought she was one of Shogi's chosen few.

Once Tamayo Rokuroba had become the Amateur Women's Meijin during her first year of junior high school, her Master brought her into the Practice League and set her on the path to becoming a Women's League player.

She achieved Women's League 3-*kyu* in the following year and was promoted to 2-*kyu* only six months later.

Awards piled up like mountains.

Her picture appeared in newspapers and on the Internet, and she was hailed as a prodigy in her hometown.

But when she dove into the Women's League she was nothing more than a rock.

A slightly attractive rock whose only purpose was to hold up the pyramid, barely a pebble.

—Then don't go in with the wrong idea!

She thought she was destined to be a star, but the Women's Shogi world relegated her to a supporting role and kept her there.

Tamayo Rokuroba rebelled against that world.

“Everyone has their own role to play!”

“Let’s work together to make the Women’s Shogi world the best it can be!”

She was too much of a competitor to get roped in by those lofty ideals.

Her eyes were focused solely on the summit. Therefore, she never felt comfortable bonding with rivals.

Events were one thing, but Tamayo grew to hate seeing other Women’s League players her age chatting among themselves like friends before matches.

She gradually became isolated within the Women’s Shogi world.

Even though she was only trying to improve, other women ridiculed her for *husband hunting* when she arranged Practice Sessions with strong male professional players. It wasn’t long before rumors spread, making her Practice Sessions awkward before they disappeared entirely.

She didn’t give up and started pursuing Practice Sessions with anyone and everyone in her quest to get stronger. However, the rumors became so widespread that it was too late to save her reputation.

The same was true for her appearances on *Nico Live*.

She committed herself to developing her skills as a Shogi commentator, learning the latest fashion trends and even taking courses on public speaking and analytical techniques.

But in the Shogi world, where a particular code of ethics reigns supreme, her efforts resulted in constant criticism.

No one understood her diligence.

No players were there to defend the proudly independent young woman.

She had a following of fans for support, but they were in the minority. *How about cleaning up your Shogi before dolling up your face?* She’d heard it all. It didn’t matter that they would call her *an ugly hag* without a second thought if

her makeup wasn't just right

—Then prove them wrong with results.

Yes. Results were the only way.

In this world that revolved around image, the Shogi board was the one thing that wouldn't lie. The Shogi board couldn't lie.

That's why—.

“..... Intense!!”

Burning with determination, Tamayo snapped a piece down onto the board.

She'd built, refined and perfected her plan until her skin flushed red. Forged over and over again to eliminate all impurities, she devised a move clad in the finest steel armor.

One look at that move.

“Haaaa————”

The nine-year-old girl sitting in front of her exhaled a long, deep breath and set to reading the board.

Then, responded with a move that never occurred to Tamayo.

“..... Agh?!”

Tamayo Rokuroba groaned beside herself at what appeared on the board.

That shining move turned her fully armored, all-or-nothing last gasp of an attack into little more than stardust blowing in the wind

“.....”

Tamayo, who had maintained a constant offensive throughout the match, moved her King for the first time. It was equivalent to raising the white flag.

A few turns later, Tamayo Rokuroba placed her hand on her piece stand and lowered her head.

“I’ve lost.”

“Thank you for the match.”

Their review session began immediately with Tamayo asking her about the move she made in the moment of truth.

Ai said that she “gave it a little thought” and continued by saying frankly, “But I knew I could win as long as I didn’t make any mistakes.”

Usually, victorious Women’s League players show restraint during review sessions.

That is especially true when younger or lower ranking players win because they’ll be subjected to intense backlash for not trying to console the loser. Having a live audience only makes matters worse.

However, Ai Yashajin refused to adhere to the norms and said exactly what she was thinking. Tamayo Rokuroba lost the match and was destroyed in the review session.

For some reason, that made Tamayo happy.

There was pain.

Of course, a feeling of powerlessness that made her want to cry was there as well.

But for whatever reason a refreshing sentiment won out.

—How about that? We could end up as friends.

She felt as though she had unearthed an undiscoverable treasure in the Shogi world.

However, she would rather die than openly ask, *Would you be my friend?*

Because for her, Shogi wasn’t about making friends—only rivals.

“..... I’m probably not even a blip on your radar,” Tamayo said to Ai as she put the pieces away. “You’re well on your way to a place I can’t reach, just like

Ginko Sora. To the top of the Women's Shogi world

The girl in front of her wasn't the least bit perturbed by those words.

She has that in common with Ginko Sora too, she thought.

"Do you remember last time, when you told me I should quit?"

"I do."

"I've thought about just that so many times without being told. If I'm going to lose to children like you There's no point continuing if I can't be number one no matter how hard I try."

She was determined to work harder than anyone, but now she had given up on pushing herself to the next level.

The more popular she became in the Women's League, the further her goals seemed to drift away.

There were times when clinging to this position seemed meaningless—.

"But you know? I'm not quitting." Not some fake grin, but with a genuine smile growing on her lips, Tamayo said, "Someday years down the road, when time has worn you down, we'll play again. And I'll be stronger. I don't care if it's thirty, forty years from now Might even be longer, but I'll be right here waiting with my feet stuck in the ground."

"Humph."

For a girl still as young as nine, forty years may as well be a thousand years in the future.

But Ai Yashajin thought about that future and gave a rather honest answer.

"I'm looking forward to it."

Only then did Tamayo Rokuroba realize the fans in the audience were applauding louder now than ever before.

CURTAIN CALL

The match and the Shogi life of one of the women involved were drawing to a close.

Sen Kouzui Women's League 3-*kyu* and amateur Keika Kiyotaki.

Keika——was fighting back tears.

“Hic Ugh

She clamped her mouth shut but couldn't prevent all the little noises from escaping.

“.....”

Meanwhile, Sen was calmly moving pieces about the board. Her gaze was fixed solely on her own territory.

The board———favored Keika. Overwhelmingly.

This match was as good as over in the early game. Sen was unable to make any decisive moves while Keika kept up a continuous offensive as if something snapped inside her.

“Ghh! Ughhh!!”

Keika was clearly sobbing. Her tears dripped onto the board.

She thought she wanted to win. She was sure of it. A victory here put her within reach of her lifelong dream.

But other thoughts were also swirling in her mind.

Sen, please! Attack me!

Make your move! Put me in checkmate!!

Those thoughts came through so clearly on the board it was painful to watch.

Keika had stretched her formation dangerously thin during the assault. It was powerful, but wide open to counterattacks like an overzealous, arcing punch. The record would make the match appear as though Keika mercilessly dismantled her opponent and grinded her into dust.

But ... knowledge of the circumstances ...

Witnessing the match firsthand.

Another story beyond Shogi would come into focus.

The fact that many fans in the audience watching their match were tearing up proved it.

Even with no hope of victory, Sen continued to move her pieces back and forth.

The moves were monotonous, their sole purpose was to prolong her surrender.

But she couldn't delay the inevitable much longer.

Sen reached to grab a piece off her piece stand, but her hand curled into a fist before it got there. Then, "....."

Her head jerked downwards as if her neck had snapped. There was no verbal concession.

"Ah"

Keika reflexively bowed in return.

In that moment—Sen Kouzui Women's League 3-*kyu* returned to the amateur ranks and Keika Kiyotaki moved to within one win of becoming a certified Women's League player.

"....."

No one said a word

Not the players, nor the audience.

Everyone knew what the outcome meant.

That's why no one said a word. Fans chock full of adrenaline after watching Ai and Ika's match were now suffocating in silence.

"..... I shouldn't have done that," Sen said in a wispy voice, gesturing to a spot on the board where she forced Keika to play Ranging Rook, her first move.

"..... Trying to avoid an opponent's best strategy, that's where I went wrong"

Pieces clacked against the board as Sen repeated that move over and over. Their high-pitched echoes gave sound to her heart's painful screams.

Sen had regretted that move through the entire match.

Playing respectable Shogi in that state of mind is impossible.

For that reason, the match had been decided on that first turn.

"I should've played my way, used my best strategy in my last match Actually, I was going to But, by the time I knew what was happening, I'd gone a different way"

"....."

"Kei."

Choking back tears, Sen addressed her old training partner.

"After becoming a Women's League player I never had fun, not once. I finally got what I always wanted, joining the Women's League like I'd always dreamed of, but it was hell on earth. Worse than the Practice League Of course it was, right? You get matched up with more really, really strong people than you ever did as an amateur."

"....."

"I couldn't win against more experienced Women's League members, even amateurs started beating me I have nothing but painful memories over the

past two years. Can I be honest with you? Right now, I'm a little relieved. I don't have to suffer anymore

“.....”

“You and I are a lot alike, Kei Saying this now might make me sound like a sore loser, but our Shogi skills and personalities are almost the same. So, you know? So

“Sen

Keika understood what Sen was trying to say.

So——.

“Even so, I want to join the Women's League.”

Her voice was crystal clear.

“Even if I'm not good enough, even if hell on earth is waiting for me As long as there's a chance, I want to see this through to the very end. You were the same way too, right Sen?”

“..... Yes.”

Lovingly running her fingers over the pieces ...

Sen turned to face straightforward and said, “This match is full of regrets but I have to tell you. I don't have a single regret about becoming a Women's League player! Not one!”

..... After the tournament, Sen became certified as a Promotion Instructor and returned to her hometown to teach children how to play Shogi.

Her message: *Always play the way you want to play!*

PRESENT

Once all the matches finished up, there was one last event to do at the arena: draw straws.

All twelve players who made it through the preliminary matches took turns pulling numbers out of a box one by one in front of the fans to determine who they'd play in the Finals.

"Next up is an amateur who advanced her pieces all the way to the Finals, Miss Keika Kiyotaki! Please come to the front!"

"Y Yes!"

Keika, who'd been sitting behind a small podium, nervously made her way to center stage. Flashes of light envelope her all at once as media members staked out in front take her picture and the Shogi fans give her a warm round of applause. She bows and flashes a big smile before giving her take on the upcoming Finals.

It goes without saying that both the Ais are sitting behind their own small podiums. Ai Hinatsuru is clapping louder than anyone as Ai Yashajin looks like she'd give her left arm to be anywhere else but claps along anyway. It's so cute how she keeps up this act.

Ika Sainokami is nowhere to be seen.

She didn't try to find me after her match and was gone before I knew it.

She'll probably keep her head down for a while Losing like that isn't the easiest to take.

"Miss Kiyotaki. Please draw your number."

"H-Here goes This one!"

The number she snatched hit her against—.

“Ohhh! There we have it, ladies and gentlemen! Miss Kiyotaki’s opponent in the first round will be—Women’s Legend Rina Shakando!”

“.....”

Every last bit of expression leaves Keika’s face.

“..... Ouch”

“..... Keika Of all people”

I watch it all happen from the guest chairs next to Big Sis, both of us holding our heads.

Getting matched up with one of the four players seeded into the Finals, and drawing the strongest one Why do you have to have this kind of luck *now*?

..... Well, then again—.

“It’s pretty amazing that all three made it to the Finals together like this.”

“You don’t look all that happy about it.”

“No, really, I am. But I just feel so worthless. A Master who can’t do anything for his apprentices”

I couldn’t be there beside them, let alone lend a hand.

“But yeah, they probably don’t even need me anymore! Ika might not’ve taken her seriously, but Ai’s gotten strong enough to win against a title holder in an even match. Haha!”

“Very true.”

“Urgh You could at least pretend to deny it”

“..... If you still haven’t figured out why the pipsqueak suddenly got so strong, you fail as a Master.”

“Come again?”

What's that supposed to mean?

"Miss Kiyotaki. Would you share your aspirations for the Finals?"

"It's hard to think right now, knowing I'm going against such a remarkable opponent"

Keika is staring off into space.

"But, I'll still be doing everything I can to prepare for the match. I won't be getting stronger overnight But I've been working toward my dream up until now, and I plan to keep going."

"Thank you very much. Best of luck to you."

Keika gives one long, deep bow before returning to her seat with tears glistening in her eyes.

There's the same kind of glistening light coming from Big Sis right next to me, watching from a distance.

"Next up, please."

"Yes!"

Energetically jumping to her feet—is Ai Hinatsuru.

And—.

"..... Huh? Both of them?"

All the other players have been coming up one at a time, but for some reason Ai Yashajin stands up too.

My first apprentice looks so nervous, her face bright red as she pulls my less than enthusiastic second apprentice toward the stage by the wrist.

Deafening applause and blinding flashes all at once. Their popularity is on another level.

These two are already idols in the Shogi world.

— They really don't need me anymore.

I've only ever seen them as kids, but now they're playing with sound technique and aiming to win. When did that start happening? At this rate, they'll keep getting better on their own Heck, they're already shooting toward the top of the Shogi world. I bet they'll both nail this interview too, no problem.

Here I am, feeling sad that the chicks are leaving the nest when—.

“Miss Hinatsuru, Miss Yashajin, your victories today were intended to be a present to a special someone. Is that correct?”

“Yes!”

Ai Hinatsuru takes a neatly folded piece of paper out of her pocket while she waits for the staff to adjust the microphone. Then, she starts reading.

“Dear Master.”

..... Come again?

A speech from out of the blue.

What she said—completely blindsided me.

“Happy seventeenth birthday!”

..... She ... knew?

Knew that today, August 1st is my birthday?

“..... It's not exactly the hardest day to remember. Eight one, *ya ichi*, it's your name,” Big Sis mumbles in a low voice next to me.

She's right. My parents named me after the day I was born, the first day of the eighth month. I always thought it was because there are eighty-one squares on a Shogi board, but it turns out Shogi had nothing to do with it.

"..... Look who's talking, *Ginko*. Were you named after your hair"

"Are you trying to pick a fight?"

"Shhh!"

I shush Big Sis to focus on the rest of Ai's speech. For some reason, Big Sis's mood took a nosedive as soon as she got started.

"I can't believe that four months have already passed since we first met. Cherry blossoms were blooming back then, but now it's already summer vacation. Where did the time go?"

"Every day as your live-in apprentice has felt like a dream.

"I've learned so much Shogi from you.

"We've cooked together.

"You held my hand walking through Osaka and Kobe.

"Playing Shogi has helped me make so many friends, and you've been kind enough to host our overnight practice sessions Sometimes you're very strict, but that makes me happy too I treasure every moment."

..... That's how she's been looking at everything"

Memories of our time together start running through my head, my chest heating up.

"You've given me all this, but I can't give you anything in return. Because I love it all too much"

"And Master, you're the Ryuo. You're at the top of the Shogi world and have talent, money, everything under the sun. And girls love you. That's why——."

Was it just me, or did her tone go down just a bit on that *girls* part" Ai

courageously talks about her true feelings.

“That’s why Ai and I made this decision together.

“To show you how strong we’ve become as a birthday present. To win no matter what at the preliminary matches today.”

Because——Ai continues, “Master will worry if we don’t get stronger. The Ryuo Title Match is right around the corner, and you won’t be able to focus——.”

“.....!!”

Never saw that coming. I gulp down the air in my throat in shock.

Now everything makes sense.

Why Ai wasn’t playing like usual, but instead going for the win without leaving any openings.

Why such a quiet girl was so determined to make it through the preliminaries.

When I finally connect the dots my chest clamps down and the corners of my eyes start burning.

All of it——it was all for me.

“Master, you always say that a player is alone when they sit in front of a board So, we have to get stronger on our own.

“I think so too. No one can fight alongside us.

“But——we can fight for someone else.

“During the challenge matches and the preliminary matches, I fought for you, Master.

“For the Master I love.

“So the Master I love would be happy.

“So the Master I love more than anything in the world wouldn’t have to worry I’m sure that I would’ve lost if I was fighting only for myself.”

—For me, her Master, Ai became stronger than everyone else.

My apprentice and her sparkling smile on the stage start getting blurry.

I want nothing more than to burn this image of my grown-up apprentice into my memory, but I can’t see clearly no matter how hard I try.

“Master Happy birthday.

“I’m sorry this is the only present I can give you.

“I’ll work harder and harder so I can give you a better present next year.

“And the next, and the next, and for—ever! I want to keep giving you presents, Master. So be my Master forever and ever.”

Folding up her sheet of paper, Ai makes a deep bow.

Then, she grabs Ai Yashajin’s hand and pulls her forward.

“Now it’s your turn, Ai!”

“..... That’s okay, I’m fine.”

“No, no! We promised together, didn’t we?”

“.....”

Ai reluctantly takes the microphone and steps to the front.

“..... I only play Shogi for myself. Not for anyone else, just me. I always have and always will.”

She says flat out and then glances right at me—and says

“But, today I played for you.”

“.....!!”

The tears I’ve been keeping in are *that* close to spilling out.

“J-Just today, got that?!”

The way she said that and then jerked her head off in the other direction, Ai’s so precious I can’t stand it.

I just sat in my chair, fighting back the tears when—*wham!*

Something shoves me forward. Somebody just kicked the back of my chair.

“Woah?!”

I tumble out, caught completely off guard Once I got my bearings, my two apprentices were standing right in front of me. As soon as I saw them—.

I hug them both.

In front of the audience for all to see.

“Uhwawa?! M-Mas ter?”

“H-Hey! What’s the big idea——.”

Surprised as they were, I whisper how I feel right into their ears.

“Both of you Thank you!”

People can call me *lolicon* all they want. Tears flow as I thank the Ais again and again. I tell them how grateful I am for the best present ever.

“Master≡”

“..... Humph.”

Ai Hinatsuru returns the hug. Ai Yashajin doesn’t push it away She’s probably embarrassed though.

Ai Hinatsuru leans in close to whisper in my ear.

“..... By the way, Master? When my match was over, Sainokami-*sensei* said something like: *Yaichi’s amazing! You got this strong by livin’ with him, right?! Nothin’s goin’ to stop me from livin’ with my precious, precious, darlin’ Yaichi! I’ll be back when I’m stronger!!*”

“She what?! S-She’s still saying stuff like that?!”

“Wait What? You’re talking about Empress Ika Sainokami, yes? What’s your relationship with her?”

“You’ll never believe it, Ai! She’s Master’s ex-girl——.”

“How many times do I have to tell you she’s not?! You worked so hard so that I could focus on the Ryuo Title Match, so why’re you bringing this up now?!”

“Shogi and love lives are two different things!!”

Ai starts going on an angry rant but That pure innocence just makes her even more precious.

These two girls in my arms are surprisingly small.

These two tiny apprentices fought against adult Women’s League players all for me. They dug deep, pulled out all the courage they had to fight hard, and it was for me.

I wanted them to know that their admirable and pure feelings were heard.

I’ll win.

No matter who comes. No matter how strong the opponent.

For the two girls who fought for me.



GOD EATER

The first of a possible three matches in the 30th Season Ryuo League Title Match Qualifier is being held in a special arena at the Shogi Association in Tokyo.

“Oh, Yaichi? You came?”

“Don’t be so surprised. This match goes into determining my Challenger”

Big Sis was getting the Shogi board we use for analysis ready when I got to the Player’s Room in the morning at the Kansai Shogi Association. She still wears her school uniform during summer vacation.

“..... How about taking a seat?”

“Ah Sure.”

Big Sis puts down the cleaning cloth and pulls out the chair next to her. I do as I’m told.

It’d be better to sit across from her to analyze the match together but Maybe she’s in a good mood? I know it’s been a while, but for some reason her scent has my heart racing.

August is already a week old. The preliminary matches were two weeks ago.

Bright blue skies with big fluffy white clouds, we’re right in the middle of the dog days of summer.

There aren’t any matches scheduled here at the Kansai Shogi Association, but pros, Women’s League members, Sub League members and journalists keep coming in. Even Mr. Oishi, who almost never comes by the association, is planted firmly in the *VIP* seat right next to a computer monitor with an unlit cigarette in his mouth. Smoking isn’t allowed in here.

“Good morning. This is Tamayo Rokuroba, coming to you live.”

There are two monitors set up, and one of them is set to *Nico Live*'s broadcast just getting started.

"Allow me to introduce today's analyst. He's the Shogi world's handsome prince But you already knew that, yes? Taishi Shinokubo 7-*dan*! Sensei, thank you for coming today."

"Yes. Thank you for having me."

"You recently lost your Imperial title to none other than the Meijin, but use that experience to add even more depth and flavor to today's match analysis, would you please?"

"Hahaha. Go easy on me."

Mr. Shinokubo forces a grin as he responds to Miss Rokuroba's pinpoint verbal offensive.

She's got the audience well-trained.

"Already going in for the win, eh Tamayon?"

"Assault my *King*, would you?"

"No, mine."

"No, no, mine."

A barrage of comments flood the screen. Popular as always.

The feed switches to the arena.

"The piece flip."

The match recorder comes to the side of the board and picks up five of the Meijin's Pawns.

As the higher-ranking player, the piece flip is done using his pieces. However, two of the Pawns landed on top of each other the first time and three Pawns landed standing up on the second.

“It looks like the match recorder is a nervous wreck too.”

“Uh-huh Yep.”

Mr. Oishi and I exchange a few words without taking our eyes off the monitor.

On the third piece flip——.

“Kannabe-*sensei*, the first move is yours.”

At ten o’clock in the morning, the match began with Ayumu’s first move.

First turn.

Ayumu goes with an orthodox 7 Six Pawn to open the Bishop Path.

“Kannabe 6-*dan*’s first move is 7 Six Pawn. Shinokubo-*sensei*? What strategy do you think the Meijin will use?”

“While he can use anything in the book, he’s a Static Rook party member at heart. He used Static Rook every time against me during the Emperor Title Match. Opening his own Bishop Path would be the norm in the situation but advancing the Pawn in front of his Rook could prove to be advantageous——.”

“Yaichi. What do you think?”

“Well, hum”

Big Sis points to our analysis board while listening to *Nico Live*’s commentary. I pick up a piece to show her my own prediction but——I didn’t get a chance.

A snap from the computer speakers beat me to it.

That snap wasn’t the Pawn in front of his Rook, nor was it him opening his Bishop Path. Judging by the sound of it

“Th-The Meijin just——.”

“Slid the Rook?!”

Chatter!! The energy inside the Player’s Room boils over.

“Second turn 3 Two Rook, eh? Who would’ve thunk?”

The Worldly Maestro takes the cigarette from his mouth and whistles.

“That strat racked up a lot of wins for me back in the day But that was years ago. The Meijin pulls a strategy out of a hat that even I, a Ranging Rooker, don’t play anymore in the first match? That could only mean——.”

“..... Voiding research,” Big Sis says.

No one tries to argue with her.

The Meijin faces his opponents’ research head on.

He sees what they try to do, learns the sequence and adds it to his own research while defending mid-match. That’s how the Meijin plays.

That Meijin——threw his own style out the window in his first match against Ayumu.

“..... Is he that scared of Ayumu’s research?”

“That’s how much he wants to win, Ginko. The guy who ends up winning no matter how he plays wants this win *no matter what he has to do*,” says Mr. Oishi, his eyes still glued to the monitor.

Chaos ensues.

I thought that the Meijin’s tsunami was going to wash over the whole board but Ayumu made waves of his own to fight back.

Big Sis gasps when Ayumu’s strategy becomes clear.

“Left Mino? And that’s a High Mino Castle?!”

An old style. That’s all that needs to be said.

Ms. Mato did a quick search of her database and starts speaking even as her fingers click away on her keyboard.

“26th turn There have been seven previous matches in which the defender advanced a Silver to 4 Three. The most recent one occurred thirteen years ago. By the way, Kannabe 6-*dan* has never used a High Mino Castle in a

league match before today.”

This kind of Shogi was played around the time Big Sis and I were born. If there’s a special meaning behind Ayumu using that style, could it be?

Mr. Oishi speaks up this time.

“That’s ’cause computers advanced and the regular Mino Castle proved to be better. Don’t forget that the Bishop Left Mino Rapid Attack used to be the bee’s knees. Even in Kanto, Kannabe’s one of the few researchers worthy of the name, so it wouldn’t be all that strange if he picked up a feel for the strategy somewhere along the line.”

Knowing the Mino Castle better than anyone, the Ranging Rook party president sounds very convincing.

But Big Sis and I have a different take.

“Big Sis. You remember?”

“..... Yes.”

Our practice session in Harajuku.

The strategy that Ayumu’s Master, Women’s Legend Rina Shakando, chose to use against Big Sis was a High Mino Castle into Fourth File Rook.

This may be the first time for Ayumu to play this way in a league match.

But—he’s surely used it against Ms. Shakando hundreds of times. Thousands of times.

That’s why he went with it.

He’s using the Shogi of the person he reveres above all others to defeat the person he sees as the strongest of all.

Big waves of emotion hit the two of us the moment we see through his way-too-pure plan.

“..... Intense!!”

The Meijin's tenacious pursuit of victory and Ayumu's intense devotion to his Master.

Those are two emotions that don't normally get compared.

However, using Shogi as a tool, here they are going head to head.

Since both players' Kings are staring each other down in eighth column, there's no chance either of them will make it across the board to *nyugyoku*. Their formations have become weapons, clashing like dueling swords nearly every turn.

That's when the Meijin makes another wave.

"His Rook was on an island out on the left, but he brought it up right next to his King?! No Ranging Rooker would ever think of that. Nice one?!"

The Meijin opens a large lead as Mr. Oishi gawks at the monitor in stunned approval. *King and Rook should never touch* is an unwritten rule that's become common sense. That move went against it, the last thing anyone was expecting.

Ayumu wasn't taking all this lying down.

"Sacrificing his Promoted Bishop and a Rook, these two?! He's good!!"

Big Sis hardly ever compliments anybody, but Ayumu's bold decision impressed her so much she couldn't help it.

Ayumu kept up the attack, recklessly advancing without giving the risks a second thought.

But the Meijin blocked every advance perfectly and extended his lead.

—So the Meijin will win after all

The whole room was getting that vibe when the monitor showed the Meijin's left hand doing something strange.

"Did his hand just quiver?!"

"Then he sees a finishing move?!"

That's one of many *legends* about the Meijin.

—His hand shakes when he reads his own victory.

That's why everyone here in the Player's Room thinks the Meijin is going to win. *Everyone except me.*

"..... Nah. That was a bad move."

Big Sis stares at me, stunned by my conclusion.

"Rushed?! The Meijin?!"

"Yeah. It's too early to send the Knight in for the kill."

"..... So, are you saying Kannabe-*sensei*'s passion got to him? Made the Meijin mess up?"

The Meijin jumps his Knight forward, promoting it at the High Mino Castle's weak spot: the flank. He's trying to flatten Ayumu's castle wall. But my reading was right on the money. Moving there was a fatal mistake. Ayumu takes the opening and charges out into a full-on counterattack.

The tide has turned—.

"I believe Mr. Kannabe will take this match," Mr. Shinokubo says, carefully choosing his words but speaking with confidence.

"Tokyo's waiting room agrees that offense has the advantage!" Ms. Mato announces after checking the official Ryuo League home page.

Mr. Oishi absentmindedly crushes his unlit cigarette between his fingers.

"He's got a Check Path on the Meijin using those two Rooks And his own King can't be touched. Surely—!!"

Ayumu is getting close to victory. Everyone can see it.

The overlord—the godly Meijin was about to be taken down by a new player—a Knight.

We all thought so.

“Fifty seconds One, two, three, four, five, six.”

Time is almost up.

“Seven.”

The Meijin’s hand appears on the monitor.

“Eight.”

That hand——

“Nine.”

——shaking so much harder now than it was before——.

“Huh?”

“Huh?!”

That move has everyone slack-jawed.

——6 Six Silver.

We couldn’t figure out the reason.

“Th He’s throwing away ... a Silver?”

“But why? What? What’s ... he trying to do?”

“Maybe preventing his opponent from putting a piece there? But using a Silver for that is——.”

The Meijin’s trembling hand had taken a Silver from his piece stand, a very valuable piece, and snapped it down right in front of one of Ayumu’s Pawns.

There’s nothing else there. It’s basically: *Here. Take it.*

That’ll never work. Being short on time must’ve made him jump the gun.

That's what everyone is thinking.

However——.

“.....!!”

Ayumu's face appears on the monitor as he leans in close to the board and turns pale. All the blood drains from his head in the blink of an eye.

Big Sis plays it out on our board and says in a garbled voice, “The *the offense gained a Silver, but lost the Check Path*?”

He has more firepower now——.

A Pawn is one space closer to the enemy King but——.

Victory slipped through Ayumu's fingers.

A move nothing short of a miracle, one that no one thought of nor understood after it was made. One that ignored common sense and standards altogether.

The Meijin has made many moves like this one and built up many legends in the process.

Every player, except for the Meijin himself, calls it one thing.

Magic———.

“Has he come from behind?”

“No. This is a draw.”

Ms. Rokuroba is thrown for a loop, but Mr. Shinokubo calmly answers.

Ayumu hasn't lost But there's only one place his King can go.

“..... *Sennichi te*. A Repetition Draw. That settles the match. The players will now switch offense and defense and start over from the beginning.”

“Af After an amazing match like this? Another one?”

The Meijin was one turn away from losing but forced a draw by sending the

match into an endless loop.

Ms. Rokuroba asks a question, her voice unsteady. “S Sensei? That move W-What was it exactly?”

“I don’t know. There may have been a better move in that situation. However——.”

“However?”

“Should the hand of God exist in this world, that’s as close as we’re ever going to get to seeing it.”

Everyone watches that last sequence play out again and again, dumbfounded, silent and feeling defeated.

..... All of it, the 6 Six Silver shock———.

WITNESSING DIVINITY

The rematch is set to start thirty minutes after the one that ended in a Repetition Draw with the players switching offense and defense.

“Yaichi. Snack run.”

“Let’s go!”

I join Big Sis on a quick dash to the convenience store across the street from the association and we stuff a shopping basket completely full of all the snacks and drinks we can find. Then we sprint back to the Player’s Room.

Pros and Sub League members thrust their hands into the snack bag before the door shut behind us. Everything was gone before I knew it.

I wolf down bread and rice balls like a little kid, downing energy drinks between breaths.

We’re in for a long night, so our tired brains have to have enough nutrients to make it through.

Everyone knew coming in that it could turn into an all-nighter. Mr. Oishi, still up at the monitor, lit a cigarette—but no one’s complaining. It’s already past 11:30 at night.

“The rematch starts at midnight Does Kannabe-*sensei*’s youth give him the edge?” Big Sis asks me as I take a rice ball with salmon flakes, my favorite kind, out of its wrapper. It’s not that simple though.

“Good question. Physical endurance and Shogi endurance don’t work the same way”

It goes without saying that playing takes a physical toll.

But mentally is where Shogi really hits hard. Then there’s the pressure that comes with playing on a big stage.

“I doubt the Meijin feels any pressure at all in a match like this. Unfortunately for Ayumu, this is his first time in a Qualifier. Nerves could’ve powered him through the last match, but now fatigue has had a chance set in during the break

“Let’s see how much magic Cinderella Boy’s got left,” Mr. Oishi says smugly in a cloud of smoke.

Back from his own break, just looking at Mr. Shinokubo’s face is enough to know he’s exhausted.

“Allow me to explain how this rematch will be played. Waiting time for the player with the least amount remaining will be restored to one hour, and the difference will be added to his opponent’s waiting time as well. This additional time will play an important role.”

“Especially since they’re both worn out,” Ms. Rokuroba adds in a tired voice, but she fixed her makeup during the break. What a professional

With the whole of Japan watching on the edge of their seats, the Meijin gets the rematch underway with his opening move.

They keep the pace up, playing quickly since they’re low on time.

The Meijin’s strategy of choice in this decisive match is——.

“Y *Yagura*?!”

That’s——Ayumu’s favorite playing style.

“He’s charging forward using his opponent’s best strategy with hardly any time on the clock?”

“But, wouldn’t it make more sense to use this the first time? Why’d he go with Ranging Rook?”

“Trying to pull off a *yagura* on defense? Don’t you think that’s stretching it a little too far?”

“Nah, that couldn’t be it. I mean——.”

Kansai’s Shogi pros exchange their theories. None were more than guesses, but each one sounds convincing in its own way.

So basically: total disarray.

Still feeling the 6 Six Silver shock, no one trusts their own interpretations let alone knows what’s going on in the Meijin’s head.

Trying to follow the mystery unfolding on the board has chipped away everyone’s concentration and drained their Shogi endurance. No human being could get a good read. All of us in here are watching the monitor, confused out of our minds like people just learning how to play

Then.

“Hah Ghahahaha!! I expect nothing less from a god!! Nothing less from a true all-rounder!!”

Ayumu’s high-pitched laugh comes out of the speakers.

“Behold! My ultimate god-slaying technique!!”

Ayumu builds a *yagura* opposite the Meijin’s. Double *Yagura*. It’s the perfect sword Ayumu has built up all this time, his strongest weapon.

And now——Ayumu is pushing it to an even higher level!



“That formation It couldn’t be?! The *gangi*—Snowroof?!”

“He’s pullin’ an 8 One Diver!!”

Ayumu transformed his *yagura* defense into something else entirely.

Its name—Snowroof!!

“I thought we were heading for Rapid Attack *Yagura* Gotta hand it to these two, they’re not one-trick ponies,” Mr. Oishi says, lighting a second cigarette with a grin on his face.

Created by a legendary Shogi player named Zean Higaki in the 1800s, it’s a Ranging Rook strategy that is often paired with Fourth File Rook. What’s Ayumu trying to do?

The Meijin makes a minor adjustment after seeing Ayumu’s strategy by changing to a *Kikusui Yagura*.

In a defensive move, Ayumu shifts his formation even further.

However, the Meijin decides to go back to a regular *yagura*.

At first glance, it looked like a wasted move But once it was over, only Ayumu’s formation was getting in his way.

“Stealing the lead like that so quickly sure ain’t easy,” says Mr. Oishi in disbelief.

The Meijin scored some points in the mid game as the two fought for position—.

Once everyone came to that conclusion, Mr. Shinokubo’s voice comes out of the speakers, “Isn’t the Meijin in a bind here?”

“What? Kannabe-*sensei* is at a disadvantage no matter how you look at it,” Ms. Rokuroba said what everyone was thinking, but Mr. Shinokubo shook his head and explained.

“I agree that Kannabe’s formation makes it difficult for him to attack. At the

same time, breaching said formation would also be extremely difficult. That's particularly advantageous for him."

"An advantage? But, Kannabe-*sensei* is known for his offensive play style Right?"

"Indeed, his attacks are razor-sharp, but that's only because his defense is perfect. He's able to attack more aggressively than anyone else because of the hundreds of hours of research holding up an imposing defense."

"N-Now I see With solid defense like this, the Meijin doesn't have many options to work with " Ms. Rokuroba mulls it over out loud.

Just as Mr. Shinokubo said, the Meijin looks stumped by Ayumu's overwhelming defensive strategy.

Watching his next move, Big Sis quietly yells, "He's going for an *anaguma* ... now?!"

"..... He can't find a way to press the attack. It looks like the Meijin wasn't expecting that move."

Now the lack of time is on Ayumu's side.

The Meijin may have taken the lead, but the only option he has in the face of Ayumu's strong defense is to put up his own guard. There isn't enough time to come up with a new plan of attack.

The gap between them closes in a hurry.

"I can't believe it but With the way things are playing out, Ayumu's a little ahead"

Shogi doesn't have a clear point system that shows which player is winning.

That's why each player has their own way to determine who is in the lead.

But it's not an exact science.

It's common for players to lose when they think they are ahead or to emerge

victorious when they think they are about to lose. Taking it a step further, not knowing who's in the lead happens way too often.

But they still play on without knowing if they'll win or lose.

Those are the people—we call competitors.

..... I stake everyone on this move!

I'm sure that's what Ayumu said in the middle of the monitor. He's striking that Vanguard pose with a piece between his fingers.

“There’s that pose!”

"No way?! H-Has he figured something out?!"

The energy in the Player's Room is through the roof.

The piece in Ayumu's grasp—a Rook!!

He takes the strongest Major Piece and, “Ex!! CALIBERRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRR—————!!” Ayumu slices forward just like that legendary sword.

“Subway Rook?!”

“Is he trying to *nyugyoku*?!”

“Seriously, 8 One?!”

The Rook slides between several pieces, moving from the fourth column to the first like going through a tunnel. It aligns with a Lance, transforming into a double-layered rocket.

Ayumu had been building a rocket behind that solid defensive wall!

“That’s too reckless! There’s nothing on his piece stand?!”

“His opponent only has a Pawn.”

Big Sis erupts at Ayumu's plan, but I can tell it'll get through by a hair. They're playing one-minute Shogi. The first one to mess up will lose.

Ayumu fires off the Lance to clear a path for his King.

That Lance, Ayumu's most beloved piece, rolls out the King's red carpet!

TAKE 'EM DOOOOOOWN!!

For the glory of royalty!

HOLY COW!!

Did it get through?!

Can't be stopped.

The Meijin'll block it, you'll see.

Direct hit.

Has the torch been passed?!

The White Knight's got this.

So many comments fill the monitor, I can't read them all. Talk about chaos.

But most of them are rooting for Ayumu.

The young Knight will slay the overlord.

It's playing out like the classic stories about heroes everyone grew up wanting to be. Epic stories about the legendary heroes.

Now thousands and thousands of people are cheering for Ayumu, wanting to see a new story unfold before their eyes.

The next eighty moves revolve around Ayumu's advancing King, making its way across the board as both players fight against each other and against the one-minute time limit.

Ayumu has committed every single one of his pieces to making sure his King arrives.

The Meijin is desperately fighting to stop it but With his own King well protected in an *anaguma*, Ayumu has more firepower.

Mr. Oishi then says in the shortest, clearest terms, “He’s in.”

Ayumu’s King arrives where the Meijin’s started out, 5 Nine.

Nyugyoku complete.

Normally, it’d be impossible for Ayumu’s King to be checkmated now.

We’d just be waiting for him to put the Meijin’s King in checkmate. Normally.

However——Ayumu’s opponent isn’t normal.

“He’s pushing a King back from the ninth row

“That’s ... inconceivable

People in the Player’s Room don’t have the energy to raise their voices anymore. The sequence unfolding right in front of them, this transcendent Shogi, has left them slack-jawed and staring at the monitor.

The analytical board isn’t moving. Can’t move. There’s no way to see what’s coming next.

There was a time when I pulled off a *nyugyoku* in a match against the chairman and pulled back.

But I made the decision to go in reverse.

I won that match because he never thought I’d actually do that.

That’s not what’s happening with this King.

Once the Meijin realized there was nothing he could do to stop Ayumu’s *nyugyoku* , he *forced it to arrive at a slightly different point*.

Then he drew Ayumu’s King deep into his territory and set a trap.

By the time Ayumu saw it and tried to pull back, it was already too late. The *nyugyoku* , the retreat, the Meijin planned it all.

No one has seen Shogi like this.

Watching sequences that have never appeared in their wildest dreams play out on the monitor, everyone is stunned. Even Mr. Oishi is staring at it with a stick of ash between his fingers.

“God,” someone whispers.

They weren’t praying for one or the other to win though.

They simply said the name of the person playing Shogi right now—the one trying to win the match at hand. That’s all.

Pushing back Ayumu’s King, the god set to work putting the isolated piece in check.

Ayumu holds out by deploying pieces from his piece stand.

But——.

“Kannabe only has the four Major Pieces left on his stand. They’re worthless for defending his King. The sequence is set in stone.”

“Will he surrender?”

“No, I don’t think he can.”

Mr. Shinokubo shakes his head from side to side. Then, as if taking a trip down memory lane, he says, “It doesn’t matter if there’s no time and his spirit is shattered, Kannabe will keep playing Right now he’s fighting on instinct alone. A Shogi player’s most basic instinct is to refuse defeat”

One-minute Shogi has gone on for over one hundred turns now and the pros watching it are starting to think it’ll go on forever to wonder if they’ll be able to watch this battle for the ages unfold until the end of time.

But the game of Shogi doesn’t last forever.

Even if it looks like it will last for eternity, the end will come.

203rd move.

Ayumu sees the Meijin put his King into check.

“.....”

Shuts his eyes and takes a few deep breaths. It’s like he’s trying to calm the storm of emotions raging in his heart.

“Fifty seconds One, two, three——.”

The match recorder starts the countdown.

Ayumu pulls a stick of chapstick out of a pocket on the inside of his cape, slides it across his lips and says his last words.

“I have been defeated.”

In that moment, a duel that will go down in Shogi history spanning a combined 345 moves came to a close. A full eighteen hours have passed since they got started.

Over on *Nico Live*:

“Chapstick surrender.”

“Royalty has style.”

“That’s royalty for you.”

Clap, clap, clap, clap.

“That Meijin’s too good.”

“God.”

“I saw god.”

“God.”

“The Eternal Septuple is in the bag!”

So many letters race across the monitor I can't see the players.

The hashtags *Chapstick surrender* and *Ryuo Title Match* start trending on Twitter as the buzz starts making its way across the country.

At 4 o'clock in the morning.

Japan is alive with excitement.

But—it's quiet enough in the Kansai Association's Player's Room to hear a pin drop.

"....."

I'm sure that Kanto's Analysis Room, the *Katsura no Ma*, is pretty much the same.

After watching consecutive matches that they would probably never be able to play themselves, everyone's feeling worthless to the core.

It's not as simple as jealousy.

It's like having your reason for living nullified, your confidence shot.

Mr. Shinokubo and Ms. Rokuroba are standing there on the monitor, looking just like everyone else. Their usual confidence and energy is gone as the two of them stare at the big board.

"Shinokubo-sensei? Where was the deciding move?"

"Wellll Right now I'm not too sure, myself"

"2 Three Lance."

"Huh?"

Big Sis whips her head around next to me.

Her ash-colored eyes have *I don't believe you* written all over them.

But I knew.

Ayumu lost the match over sixty moves before he threw in the towel, on the

142nd move.

If he had just taken the Meijin's Silver by moving his King to 3 Six instead, he would've won. Ayumu just didn't have time to read that far ahead during one-minute Shogi.

But I knew.

The Ryuo's got to be shaking right now.

Might as well kiss Kuzuryu goodbye.

I stand and stare as those comments rolling across the monitor. My eyes on him, I try to figure out what's going through Ayumu's mind right now.

Went up against a god, gave everything he had and went beyond his own limits—only to come up short. How that kind of defeat feels.

There's no fear.

No surprise or shock.

Just quietly shaking in doubt. That, and intense burning in the chest that's never been there before.

“..... If that wasn't enough”

Extinguished cigarette butt still between his fingers, Mr. Oishi starts posing questions to no one in particular.

More talented than anyone.

More experienced than anyone.

Works harder than anyone.

Has a stronger fighting spirit than anyone.

And ... absorbs the latest research from the best young players to grow faster than anyone, this Meijin—

“Then who can beat this guy?”

Nobody had an answer.

But——

EPILOGUE

“Ai? Are you ready yet?” I call out from my room as I give the zipper on my duffel bag a really hard yank to get it to close all the way.

“Almost!” My apprentice’s voice comes through the wall.

Then ... *step, step, step* I hear her come around the corner and then Ai jumps through my doorway.

“All ready! Everything’s all set to go!!”

“..... You look like you’re about to run away in the middle of the night.”

I comment on the massive backpack sticking out beyond her shoulders. My apprentice puffs out her cheeks before hitting me with a snappy comeback.

“Then what’s all that luggage for, Master?”

“I’m anxious, that’s all.”

Ayumu lost the second qualifier, officially making the Meijin my challenger for the Ryuo title match.

After losing the first match, the second battle was intense from the get-go with both players exchanging blows all the way through the mid-game. The tide turned two or three times before the late game Ayumu set the scene, surrendered with dignity and grace and then bowed out from the Ryuo League stage.

Their match over, and review session wrapping up, I got a message from Ayumu.

“He’s strong.”

That was it.

Then again, those few words had more meaning than hundreds.

“Can you blame me? This is the first match outside of Japan in six years. The association and media are having a field day It doesn’t help that the Meijin is trying to become the Eternal Septuple, gain his 100th title season and it all depends on this title match that’ll go down in Shogi history. Every newspaper and magazine’s going to be covering it.”

Fully expecting the Meijin will gain the *Eternal* designation, the association’s already filed an application for a Citizens Honor Award with the Japanese government. I haven’t even lost yet and they’re off planning the after-party.

“It’s going to take a long time to get there, right? I’ve got to finish my homework before we get there

“We’ve got about nine hours. Maybe I’ll take a book of Shogi puzzles too.”

“Swimsuit! Where did I put my goggles and towel?!”

“You can buy those when we get there. I’ll buy your dress for the party the night before the match too. They sell extra underwear there, right? Oh, wait, people over there grow up so fast they might not have your size.”

“Master, you perv! *Darabuchi*! Can’t you be more delicate?!!”

My first match against the godly overlord.

My first time in a new place, my first defense match.

Everyone expects me to lose, and the whole country wants me to. It’s hopeless, no matter how I look at it.

The only reason I can still joke around is because Ai is here with me.

Of course, the letter she wrote for my birthday is in my duffel bag and still gives me strength every time I read it.

“Hmm, I know there’s a lot here but I can’t kick the nerves My kimono is being shipped over there, so as long as I’ve got my valuables, I should be okay.”

“Master, what about your passport?”

“Give me a break, Ai. How could I ever forget the most important thiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiing?!”

I throw my bag open and dump everything out but It’s not here!

“What?! Where’s my passport?! W-Where did I put it?!”

“You can’t leave Japan without your passport?!”

“I’m screeeeewed! Forfeiting alreeeeeeeeeady!!”

A title holder, forfeiting a title match because he couldn’t get to the arena?! That’s unheard of!

There’s more than just my title on the line. They could force me to retire. I’m dead (^o^).

Then it hits me.

“Oh, that’s right! Keika has my passport!”

“How could you forget something so important?!”

“Whew, that scared the crap out of me.”

“I think it took a year or two off my life”

I just made a nine-year-old think about her own life expectancy. That’s gotta be a sin or something

But still, we’re all packed and ready to go.

“Alrighty! Ai, final check!”

“All windows are closed! The gas is shut off!”

“All rental DVDs have been returned. No jobs to do or invoices due while we’re gone. The mailbox is empty.”

“The refrigerator is clean and empty.”

“All messages and emails have been answered We’re good!!”

I turn off the tablet I use for work.

My apprentice looks up at me like a puppy wearing an oversized backpack, our eyes meet and we nod.

“Here we go, Ai!!”

“Yes, Master!!”

Duffel bag in one hand, I take my apprentice’s small hand with the other and the two of us go out the door.

The first match of the 30th season Ryuo Title Match.

My first defense match, and it’s against the greatest challenger.

Our battle will take place——across the ocean.

FOR THE AFTERWORD: LAYING OUT A WHITE CLOTH

The Ryuo's Work Is Never Done has won the Shogi Pen Club's 28th Literary Award.

It may not be the most well-known award for literature, but Shogi Pen Club has a long and prestigious history with yearly winners since the organization was founded in 1987.

Every work they've selected in the past is outstanding. But this is the first time a light novel has won It's such an illustrious award that part of me wonders if light novels should be considered in the first place.

When the finalists were announced, I distinctly remember shouting, "What?! Is this okay?!" in surprise at seeing my own work on the list.

Since the main criteria for consideration is that the content must be related to Shogi, *The Ryuo* ... qualifies. However, light novels depend a great deal on illustrations so the fact that manga isn't considered for the award made me nervous about how my work would be received by the selection committee They would need to get past the fact that elementary school girls play a big part in the story as well *Ryuo* was selected in the end, but the announcement hadn't been made when I was writing this afterword. I was looking forward to it, but also anxious

I'd like to take a moment to go into more detail about the Shogi Pen Club. First, there's the *Literary Award* that I won, but they also give out awards for *Technical* and *Journalism* categories as well.

The *Technical Award* is given to books called *Kisho*, basically Shogi textbooks. Therefore, most of the winners were written by professional Shogi players. On a side note, I bought quite a few of them for my own research But I'm

ashamed to admit I couldn't make heads or tails of them.

The reason someone with zero Shogi skill like me was able to write a story revolving around the sport is thanks entirely to Shogi *journalists*.

Just like how the Shogi Pen Club has a category specifically for them, articles form the core of Shogi journalism. The club itself was created with the intent of improving the quality of Shogi articles, so it's safe to say that Shogi journalists are the real stars in the Shogi Pen Club Awards.

So, what are these articles?

Please take a moment to flip through a Japanese newspaper if you have one handy. The Shogi section should be in the middle somewhere. It's common for there to be pieces set out on a Shogi board with an explanation of why a player decided to make a certain move next to a Go diagram in a set. These explanations, which carefully dissect a match over several days, are Shogi articles.

Oniroku Dan-*sensei* described it this way: "If match records left behind by Shogi players are the script, it's the Shogi journalist's job as a writer to make it into a movie."

Average people can't watch a professional Shogi match and understand what's going on.

An even bigger problem is that average people don't have an opportunity to watch a professional match with their own eyes.

It's Shogi journalists who make professional Shogi easy to understand and use their literary talents to recreate the tension in the arena with words.

Shogi journalists do many jobs these days such as updating live blogs during title matches and writing about match records. Others have branched out even further to covering interviews with professional Shogi players and immortalizing Shogi history in books

A Shogi journalist named Mato made her full debut in Volume 4, but real journalists write using pen names rather than their actual names. They're much more mysterious than the Shogi players in the spotlight, but it's through their work that fans like me get their first taste of the Shogi world.

The first time I got to see them in action was when I attended the Mynavi Women's Open Preliminary Matches to do research.

It came up in this book, but the presence of a live audience makes these matches unique.

Since everyday Shogi fans can watch the matches unfold up close and personal, I joined them with my memo pad in hand and heart beating a mile a minute waiting for the matches to get underway But when I happened to spot someone holding a laptop next to the match recorder who was busily wiping down the board and polishing each piece, and recognized him as a journalist, I got so excited that I shouted, "That's Mr. OOOO!!" In my head, of course.

About my age, what was particularly great about this journalist, other than his superb writing ability, was his vast Shogi knowledge and his willingness to use it. His work inspired so many scenes in my head that I (one-sidedly) consider him to be a contributor to the story.

From that point on, my focus was squarely on him.

I wasn't about to let this golden opportunity to see what Shogi journalists do behind-the-scenes go to waste and became the only fan in attendance looking in that direction.

Thanks to that, I gained something extremely valuable.

The Shogi journalist sat next to the match recorder close to the board and opened the laptop to start blogging the match in real time Then he did something strange.

He laid a white cloth over the keyboard.

I knew what it was for immediately. Typing would make clicking noises during the match. This white cloth was meant to muffle the sound so the players could concentrate.

When I saw that, all of the blogs I'd read through up to that point ... all the paragraphs I'd thought of as just robotic drawl about the matches suddenly had a heartbeat.

It was just a piece of cloth, but all of the emotion it represented brought a new layer of intensity to everything I'd read.

The Shogi world I write about is fictional with its characters inspired by various players and my own imagination. What I'm trying to say is that my characters aren't modeled from real people.

That being said, it wouldn't be right for me to write whatever I want about the Shogi world.

I've learned so much about the game and episodes involving individual players from Shogi journalists.

Using that information, I have to figure out how to strike a chord with readers using Shogi and the players. That's how I work.

What I have in common with people who read Shogi articles is a love for the game.

Everyone wants others to treat what they love with care and respect. However, that doesn't mean I can just paint players in a beautiful light and be done with it. Playing a match will always produce one winner and one loser. I shouldn't hide the agony of defeat, nor how the defeated feels about the victor and I should clearly show the reader if there was any foul play.

I can't afford to forget a certain feeling when writing these scenes. Seeing that white cloth laying across the keyboard gave me a small sense of it.

Should I ever get so caught up in my own literary skills that I forget to be

grateful to Shogi and everyone involved in the game, I will have forgotten the most important thing Shogi journalists have taught me. Anything I write would be worthless and wouldn't strike a chord with anyone.

So, that's why——

Whenever I sit down to type at my work computer, I visualize laying out a white cloth over my keyboard.

I plan on continuing the story with my love of Shogi and a strong respect for its players close to my heart.

..... In any case, I won an award from the Shogi Pen Club!

Unlike many of my contemporaries, I didn't win any *Up-and-Coming Author* type awards when I first started out and I might've had of a bit of an inferiority complex. I just sort of kept going and wound up a professional writer. So I'm overjoyed.

But what makes me even more happy is that a surprisingly large number of people have enjoyed reading *The Ryuo's Work Is Never Done*.

Back when I was younger, my awardless inferiority complex was contorting my mind and making me say things like, "I didn't get into this business to win awards. I'd quit if someone gave me one!" But having my work recognized like this and seeing people who've supported me along the way be happy for me makes me glad I decided to write it.

Hiroataka Nozuki, who has appeared in all of my afterword segments so far, said he "couldn't be happier if he'd won the award himself." Thank you so much. I'll keep working hard to make you proud.

I have met so many people through this series since Volume 1 hit shelves.

Shogi fans will stop me at events and say, "I read your book." I was so surprised when I went to watch a soccer game, and someone came up to me

and said, “Actually, I like Shogi too.”

Shogi has a strange power, and I’ve been reminded of that almost every day.

The reason I’ve been able to write a story so many people have enjoyed is all thanks to my supervisors at *Saiyuki*. I couldn’t do it without you!

They’ve also been supervising the manga version along with my light novels, so I believe it’s an accurate, high-quality representation of Shogi as well.

With Kogeta-*sensei*’s artwork and all of Kazuki-*sensei*’s youthful energy going into its design, I’m sure they’ll build on the novel’s good parts and take out the bad (haha). Professional player Koru Abe may have said something along the lines of “it’s interesting” during an appearance on *Nico Live*?

The world of *The Ryuo’s Work Is Never Done* just keeps getting bigger. I hope you stick around and enjoy!



**REVIEW
SESSION**

Mr. Yaichi Kuzuryu Receipt

¥ 1,000,000.00

00/00/20XX

REVIEW SESSION

“It looks like my apprentices’ll turn pro.”

I walk up to two young ladies in the Player’s Room at the association on a day in late August.

“Congratulations to you.”

“Meh, already knew though. I was watchin’ Mynavi.”

Machi Kugui claps her hands together to celebrate, but Ryou Tsukiyomizaka looks like she could care less. Both are big-name title holders and Women’s League mainstays. That ... and they get bored easily. It’s best to steer clear of these two. Otherwise you’ll end up getting picked on, like me!

Since there’s a good chance my apprentices will join them in the Women’s League sooner rather than later, I came here today to give them a proper greeting But, I have another reason too. That’s——.

“Present?”

“Yes. It might still be a little early, but I need to figure out what to give them for turning pro, something to celebrate the occasion Any ideas? Oh, and I’d like to get something for Keika too”

“A present? Gonna need a bit more to go on than that.”

“Setting Keika aside for the moment, your apprentices both attend elementary school, correct? I doubt you’ll find our opinions useful.”

“But both of you joined the Women’s League when you were in elementary school, didn’t you? Please, if you could tell me what your Masters gave you back then, that would really help me out here. Both of my apprentices are good enough to challenge for titles, so I think you two are the best ones to ask.”

I take a moment to brag a little and try talking to the Women’s King first.

“Ryou, did you get a present?”

“Me? Pieces. *Moriage-Goma* made with boxwood so they have that cool-lookin’ tiger skin pattern. They’re *ryouko* calligraphy style. I use them for studyin’ now.”

“*M-Moriage-Goma*? And, with a tiger pattern too?”

Moriage-Goma are Shogi pieces where the letters on each piece have been painted on in layers so they physically stand out. As they take so long to make, they’re extremely expensive and only get used for title matches.

In other words, they cost an arm and a leg. A complete set would be somewhere around 400 thousand yen.

Three of them would be—Yikes! 1.2 million yen

“There’s a lot to like about pieces, and they make you want to practice! I love how crisp everythin’ is in the *ryouko* style. Best present I ever got. Just takin’ them out of the box and linin’ them up on the board made me feel like a real women’s pro.”

“I, uh, I see What about you, Machi?”

“Myself? I received a full kimono. That was my attire during my first title match.”

“R-Really A kimono?”

An ominous bead of cold sweat trickles down my back.

“P-Please excuse me for being rude but How much, um, do you think it was?”

“Let me think a moment. Price is no object when it comes to kimonos, but they’re not unreasonable.”

“Are they cheap?!”

“3 million yen, perhaps?”

“Thr-!”

No good. Her definition of *unreasonable* is completely different from regular people.

“Oi, what’re you gettin’ your feathers ruffled for, trash? Both your apprentices are title material? Yeah?”

“Y-Yes, they are but They’re still growing, so I think that can wait”

“Think about it: if they win their way into the Women’s League in the Mynavi Finals, they could go right up to the title match, yeah? There ain’t time to fix up a full kimono before it’ll start.”

“..... You have a point”

I received a traditional kimono from Master, as did Big Sis. Of course, he paid for it all. We aren’t even related by blood, but he dropped millions of yen on his apprentices all at once.

Masters never accept money from their apprentices, so the only way to say thank you is to do the same for your own apprentice

“Winning the Ryuo Title Match this year lined your pockets, didn’t it? It’s better to buy when you got extra cash, know what I mean?”

“Well”

“I have it!”

Clap! Hands together, Machi makes a suggestion.

“Why don’t I pull a few strings with a tailor I have close ties to in Kyoto and get a reduced estimate for you? The order will be for two nine-year-old girls and one twenty-five-year-old woman. So, three in total, yes? Would you like to include an *obi* sash? Make them full sets?”

“U-Um, yes. Well The two girls aren’t very tall so Combined, they’d need about the same amount of fabric as an adult”

Machi is already on the phone with the shop in Kyoto. Meanwhile, I'm running numbers through my head next to her. If one full set goes for 3 million, then 6 million should cut it

Hanging up, Machi turns to me and says.

"It's all sorted out."

"How much?"

"10 million yen."

Where'd that extra zero come from?!

"Too much! Way too much?! I've seen what kimonos go for in department stores, and it wasn't anywhere near that much?!"

"Long, hand-sewn *kyo-yuzen* patterned sleeves at this price is unheard of."

"We're talkin' long sleeves, *obi* sashes, *nagajuban* under gowns, *zouri* sandals, *tabi* socks and handbags for everyone, yeah? The kimono set I got ran me 4 mil I'll have you know."

"I'll go to the department store! I'll buy the cheaper ones!"

"Idiot! You want your apprentices to show up in some plain ol' drab? The whole Shogi world'll think you found them out on the street?!"

"But"

"We're only talkin' 10 mil here!"

Ryou smacks me on the back with all she's got.

"You'll be rakin' it in once the placement matches start, yeah? Quit penny pinching. Splurge on your apprentices, why don't you!"

"But, no, I——."

"Don't have that kind of dough? That ain't gonna fly."

Ryou taps on her smartphone a few times and thrusts it in front of my face.

“Anyone can see what the top ten pros make per match on the association’s home page. I know exactly what your bank account looks like. Oh, you’re number three in the country. Ain’t that nice. You really made bank with those Ryuo League Matches last time, yeah?”

“Ryuo, winning this year’s title match will yield 42 million yen, yes? And even should you lose the best-of-seven series, you shall earn 15-and-a-half million at the very least. There’s money to spare.”

“Oi, fork over your bank statement.”

“That’s a bit

“Title holders get to skip all the preliminary stuff competin’ for other titles. Talk about an advantage over the usual route. Gettin’ another title or two should be a cinch.”

“Let me see, title matches are worth

“The regular league matches should be in there too. Pro Shogi players have it so nice.”

“That’s only if you win! Lose and you’re just trying to get by! Wait a sec, you two have titles! You ought to be rolling in cash?! More than the average pro at least!”

“10 million yen for Mai-asa Tournament!”

“5 million yen for SB Tournament!”

“.....”

My seventeenth summer—the day that I decided to never ask these two for advice again.

“You know, all this talk about kimono is making me want another one! Oi, trash! Buy one for me!”

“I would like one as well!”

“Why do I have to fork out the cash?! Quit picking on me and go buy them yourselves!!”

AUTHOR

SHIROW SHIRATORI

I went to watch the Mynavi Preliminary Matches in person to do some research. It was the first time I'd been to live matches in a while, but the intensity was unbelievable!

For this volume, I focused more on what's happening around the board rather than just what's taking place on it. I hope you can feel the tension as players pull out all the stops against one another!!

ILLUSTRATOR

SHIRABII

I have a feeling life is going to get tough for Yaichi as the (jealous) Big Sis makes her own advances. Please enjoy Volume 4.

The Ryuo's Work is Never Done!

VOLUME 4

Story by Shirow Shiratori Art by Shirabii

Supervision by Saiyuki

RYUO NO OSHIGOTO! 4

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Original Japanese edition published in 2016 by SB Creative Corp.



SB Creative

2-4-5 Roppongi Minato-Ku Tokyo, 106-0032 JAPAN

Editor: Annabel LEE

Translator: Andrew GAIPE

Designer: Erika TERRIQUEZ

Producer: Atsushi YANAI